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Allegiances

[image]

THE GORGE

LEADER

Deadeye – svelte black tomcat bearing a fleshy scar over his right eye

REGENT

Clawtail – stocky light brown tabby she-cat

HEALER

Frozenleaf – dainty white molly with icy blue eyes
Apprentice; Shortpaw – black tom with a broken foot

WARRIORS

Snowface – blue-grey tom with white splotches

Coldstep – grey-and-white she-cat with pale blue eyes

Greyheart – scar-covered golden tom with greyish-blue eyes
Apprentice, Finpaw – golden tabby tom

Jaggedthorn – brown tabby she-cat and amber eyes
Apprentice, Thornpaw – brown tabby she-cat, deep amber eyes

Hawkscar – cream tom with faint white markings and amber eyes

Rocksplash – stern-faced tortoiseshell she-cat

Mudwing – small black-and-white tom

Frostheart – cloudy grey tom with chilling amber eyes
Apprentice, Redpaw – tortoiseshell tom

Fireclaw – ginger tabby tomcat

QUEENS

Morningflower – tortoiseshell she-cat, mother of Deadeye's kits; Dapplekit, Blackkit, and Sunkit

Ironheart – ginger she-cat, mother of Brownkit, Rabbitkit, Nightkit, and Pearlkit

Foxleap – russet she-cat, mother of Greyheart's kits; Spottedkit, Dustkit, Fernkit, and Riverkit

ELDERS

Molestrike – light brown she-cat

Frogtooth – scarred she-cat, retired early due to failing eyesight

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SWIFTCLAN

LEADER

Fishstar – brown tabby tom with green eyes

DEPUTY

Grassheart – light tabby tom, blue eyes

MEDICINE CAT S

Brightpelt – white she-cat with turquoise eyes

Muddapple – brown tabby tom with golden eyes

WARRIORS

Brackenclaw – broad-shouldered golden-brown tom

Birchtail – golden tabby she-cat, amber eyes
Apprentice, Mosspaw – light grey tabby she-cat

Hollyheart – seal-point she-cat with deep blue eyes

Ploverfern – grey tabby tom with amber eyes and cream eartips

Haildapple – dappled grey she-cat, green eyes

Hazelberry – black she-cat, greenish-brown eyes
Apprentice, Mousepaw – solid grey tom with one blue and one yellow eye

Longstep – pale tabby tom with long legs
Apprentice, Fernpaw – dappled grey she-cat

Mirepelt – brown tabby tom with lighter brown markings on his legs
Apprentice, Dapplepaw – tortoiseshell she-cat

Cottontuft – blue-grey tom with white spots on his muzzle

QUEENS

Juniperstorm – grey tabby she-cat, expecting Bluefang's kits

NIGHTCLAN

LEADER

Harestar – light brown tabby she-cat, amber eyes

DEPUTY

Kestrelwing – tabby tom

MEDICINE CAT

Tigerflight – black tom with the faintest of black stripes, green eyes

WARRIORS

Blackfur – light grey she-cat with near black stripes
Apprentice, Sandpaw – sandy-colored tabby she-cat with darker tail

stripes

Lionpelt – thick-furred golden tabby tom
Apprentice, Leopardpaw – beautiful dappled tom, green eyes

Dewfrost – light grey molly, amber eyes

Greythorn – solid grey she-cat
Apprentice, Whitepaw – grey tabby with a white paw

Honeyheart – honey colored she-cat, green eyes
Apprentice, Brightpaw – brown-and-white she-cat

Gorsefeather – orange tabby tom with white patches

Sagewillow – brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Mintpaw – light brown tabby she-cat

Petalheart – grey and white she-cat

Clovernose – black and white she-cat
Apprentice, Frostpaw – silver tabby tom, blue eyes

BLAZECLAN

LEADER

Heatherstar – black she-cat, purplish-blue eyes

DEPUTY

Yellowheart – yellow tabby tom
Apprentice, Talonpaw – sharp-faced dark brown tabby tom with a pale muzzle

MEDICINE CAT S

Blueheart – scruffy blue-grey tom, honey-colored eyes

Skyfeather – deep grey she-cat with pale blue eyes

WARRIORS

Jayleaf – grey tabby tom with warm amber eyes
Apprentice, Canyonpaw – brownish-grey tabby tom

Tinyflight – small white she-cat with amber eyes
Apprentice, Smallpaw – fluffy black-and-white tom, blue eyes

Heatherstorm – brown tabby she-cat

Whitenose – grey-and-white tom, amber eyes
Apprentice, Bouncepaw – poofy brown-and-white tabby tom

Pouncefur – ginger and white she-cat
Apprentice, Firpaw – pale brown tabby tomcat, green eyes

Birdheart – light tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Echopaw – sleek black she-cat, amber eyes

Rockstorm – smoky grey tom with harsh amber eyes

Swallowclaw – long-furred, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

QUEENS

Spiderclaw – black she-cat, mother of Yellowheart's kits; Mousekit and Bramblekit

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RUSHCLAN

LEADER

Kinkstar – brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

Bumbleflight – yellow tabby tom, green eyes

MEDICINE CAT S

Moonlight – silver tabby she-cat

Sunclaw – orange tabby tom with a white streak on his face

WARRIORS

Heronstrike – blue-grey tom with darker legs, golden eyes

Jewelfur – grey she-cat with tiny white splotches, amber eyes
Apprentice, Wolfpaw – dark grey tabby tom with unusually scruffy neck fur

Otterclaw – ginger she-cat, amber eyes
Apprentice, Volepaw - solid brown she-cat

Nightdapple – dark-dappled tortoiseshell she-cat
Apprentice, Squirrelpaw – ginger tomcat with darker markings around his eyes

Harestreak – brown tabby she-cat

Ravenstrike – black tom
Apprentice, Copperpaw – dusty-brown tabby tom

Treestorm – brown tabby tom

QUEENS

Crowsky – grey tabby she-cat with darker grey speckles, expecting Ravenstrike's kits

Prologue

[image]

The moon cast a soft glow on an otherwise dark forest. A gentle breeze was the only thing breaking the silence of a small clearing. At one side, bushes brushed against one another; at the other, misshapen stones and rocks lay upon one another as if to mark a destination. The faint lapping of water could be heard – the wind was only just strong enough to sway the surface of a starlit pool. Generations of pawprints were pressed into the dirt leading up to the pool and the ground around the edge was packed down from frequent visits. Sitting at the pond were two cats: a white she-cat and a smaller brown tabby tom. They were peering around cautiously, as if they expected something to jump out at them at any moment. There was a snap of a twig, a few bushes rustling ever so slightly more, and multiple sets of eyes began to peer out at the small pond.

The bordering bushes quivered as a dark cat emerged; soon he was followed by a handful of others. The shadow of a cat led them to the shimmering pool and they all took a spot at the edge as if it were second nature to them. All of the strange cats had the appearance of stars in their fur – a soft shimmer that would easily be mistaken for droplets of water. It was a trait that the first two didn't share. The dark tomcat was the first to break the heavy silence.

"Greetings," he murmured to the cats they had joined. His voice, though smooth, carried a sense of urgency. The two felines dipped their heads in response – although it was a rather peaceful setting, there was a hint of tension in the air. "I'm sure you're already well aware, but I have a message for you." He fell silent after that, and the other two cats watched him expectantly. They glanced at each other anxiously; the smaller tom quivered in a mixture of excitement and fear. After a stiff moment's pause, all of the star-pelted cats spoke as one. Their voices chimed together in harmony, ringing around the clearing.

"There will be a great relief for the Clans, and you must help guide it to fruition. The temptation of bloodshed will torture the swift, but with the help of the blazing rush of the river at night all of the remaining Clans will share a golden victory." And as soon as the starry cats finished every cat – except for the dark tom – turned around to leave. He stared the remaining two cats down. The white she-cat stood up tall despite the fear in her gaze. Her darker companion had shrunken away though his eyes still glittered with excitement.

He spoke once again, his previously soft voice now holding a hint of sadness. "You must be careful with whom you speak these words to. If the wrong cat finds out, they will give everything to steer fate sour." At that he, like the other starry-furred strangers, stood and began to pad softly out of the clearing.

"Wait!" the white she-cat called desperately. "You're not even our ancestors . . . why are you telling us this? Who are you?"

"Because—" The tomcat paused, but did not turn around. Sadness laced his voice more powerfully than ever before, and his tail drooped pathetically behind him. "This prophecy was not meant for my old Clan; they have strayed too far for us to contact them in good conscience. Even if we wanted to, our connection with them has been dark for a long time; believe me, we have tried to break through to them. We only know of their survival through the medicine cats and the others who reside here in StarClan. There is no telling what would happen if we left this in their paws." He paused for a second, his shoulders sagging a bit. "I'd give anything to be able to contact my kin once more." The last whisper was so soft, the two visitors had thought they imagined it. Before they could call out to him again, the vision swirled away. The clearing around them slowly faded into black nothingness.

The pair of cats struggled to their paws alongside a group of cats from other Clans. A single look at their drowsy partners told them that they didn't share the vision. Whether they even had any visions of their own was doubtful. They exchanged a worried glance before rushing ahead of the others, ignoring their attempts to call them back. They kept a steady trot until they were out of sight. When they believed they were far enough away, they sped up to a sprint

and pelted off through the forest and marshes. They raced around rotten logs and boggy puddles towards their camp. As soon as they returned to their Clan's home, they searched the clearing of the camp for their leader. The smaller tabby tom flicked his white-furred companion as they spotted the dark brown leader; they hurried to him without hesitation.

"Sir, we need to speak to you . . . alone," the she-cat meowed in a soft tone. The leader maintained his warm and welcoming expression and with a flick of his tail, he trotted towards his den. As soon as they were alone, he dropped his facade and sat with the two flustered and now mud-covered cats.

"What is it?" Concern filled his voice as awaited whatever grave news the two cats had learned when speaking to the ancestors. Together the cats explained the vision they saw to their leader, along with the eerie message they had been left with.

"They weren't even our ancestors," the white she-cat added in a hushed voice. "I don't recognize them, at least. I was told that they . . . they lost contact with their kin on the territories. I'm afraid of what that means as far as their identities, but . . . ."

A heavy silence fell over the cats within the den. There were only a few things they could discern, and the leader was quick to speak on it. "So," he murmured, "this . . . vision was clearly a prophecy handed to us." After a nod from his two guests, he continued. "Whether we like it or not, I'm going to assume it will involve all of the Clans. If it was important enough for the ancestors of another . . . previous Clan to deliver it to you two . . . did the others seem shaken up after you shared tongues with StarClan?" The tabby paused for another moment, and the two smaller cats glanced at each other and shook their heads. "*'Great relief'* . . ." he repeated, "Perhaps he means a relief from what happened with the Gorge? And the temptation of bloodshed could involve them, as well. It wouldn't be the first time they had brought ruin to the territories, and the last battle has left the rest of the Clans in shambles." The leader was silent once again, pondering the prophecy that now seemed to wrap around the Clans. "But . . . he said *'the remaining Clans'*? It sounds as though not everyone will survive whatever fate is heading our way."

"That's exactly what I thought," the smaller brown tom murmured softly, concern dripping from his voice. "But what exactly is this golden victory? How can a victory be golden when it's just a victory?" The three cats looked at each other, now at a loss for more answers. Yet again a heavy silence fell upon the trio.

"You should tell the rest of the Clan to be on their toes." The white she-cat stood and gave her superior a meaningful glance. "Just . . . don't tell them too much. We will discuss this with the other medicine cats when we next see them, in case they were visited as well."

"I will when the time is appropriate," the leader mumbled absently. His head was spinning from the knowledge of what could quite possibly be their doom. He rose to his paws, shook his pelt, and padded out of the den – leaving his medicine cats alone. After a moment of hesitation, they got up and followed the tom to the clearing.

A pained wailing echoed from one of the dens inside the vast cave system that was the Gorge's home. Cats peered from their dens – some curious, some worried, some annoyed. A black tomcat grunted in annoyance, the scar over his eye wrinkling as a visible tell of said distaste. "Frozenleaf," he snapped, "hurry up and help that queen. She's disturbing everybody's peace. Take Shortpaw with you, it'll be great experience for him." A white she-cat rolled her eyes as she hurriedly got together salves and medicines.

"If you want it done so fast, you can always do it yourself, Deadeye," she growled before picking up a bundle of herbs. Irritation dripped from her voice, but underneath that was a hint of concern and urgency. She nudged a smaller black cat next to her harshly, and he limped to a second bundle she had made and picked it up.

Instead of retaliating, Deadeye gave her a meaningful glare. "If it were entirely up to me, I'd simply send the queens off to fend for themselves," he stated with an unsettling calm about him. "But we need those kits. We can't afford to struggle as much as the Clans are right now." The medicine cat and her apprentice simply ignored him and they both hurried off into the den where the wailing was

coming from. Inside the den, a plump russet-furred she-cat panted excessively and snapped at the two newcomers.

"It's about time," she grunted at the pair of cats, her voice seething with agitation. "Let's get this over with." Her mate was nowhere to be found, though she didn't seem to mind. Frozenleaf nudged a wet ball of moss towards the queen's mouth and set the bundle of herbs down. Both of the medicine cats quickly worked to help the queen deliver her kits.

After a long and exhausting night, they were finally born and the queen was resting happily. There were two brown kits, a reddish tabby tom, and a golden she-kit who bore a striking resemblance to her father, Greyheart, who had finally arrived to see his mate and kits. Deadeye had shown up to see the new additions to the Gorge, though the tension he brought with him only suggested ill intent. He kept his eyes on the kits, scanning over each one of them thoughtfully before his gaze rested on the final she-kit. Distrust settled in the back of his mind and he gave a soft growl.

"Make sure you raise these kits well, Greyheart." The two mates turned their gazes on their leader, neither giving away any emotion. "It would be a shame if any of them were to walk down the wrong path."

There will be a great relief for the Clans. The temptation of bloodshed will torture the swift warriors, but with the help of the blazing rush of the river at night all of the remaining Clans will share a sweet victory. The path ahead will be spotted with sacrifice to correct the wrongdoings of the past, but with correct guidance all Clans will experience a golden dawn and temporary serenity.

Chapter 1

[image]

"All cats strong enough to eliminate their own prey, gather before me!"

Spottedkit woke up to Deadeye yowling for yet another Gorge meeting. More and more meetings have been called as the summer grew hotter, and she'd noticed the fresh-kill pile dwindling; the prey that *happens* to be there is unusually scrawny. After staggering to her paws Spottedkit rushed to wake her siblings to go watch the next gathering. They stumbled out of the moss-filled cave that was the nursery into the much colder, harder main cave.

"Today is a wonderful day for the Gorge," Deadeye started, his voice sending a heavy chill down Spottedkit's spine-nothing new here to anyone in the Gorge, and multiple cats below him shifted visibly. "We have three new warriors in the Gorge starting today." Before Deadeye finished speaking, triumphant howls and yowls erupted from the crowd below him.

Spottedkit noticed Thornpaw, Finpaw, and Redpaw sitting together near the front of the crowd. The three soon-to-be warriors held their chins in the air proudly, but anyone could see that they were nervous. It was common knowledge even within the Gorge that holding the role of a warrior requires more ability than the apprentices are trained for. She knew that, though they expressed pride, they were nervous deep down-they had to be. They didn't know what would be expected of them. Nobody quite did.

"Apprentices, come forward to accept your new names with honor." Deadeye's naturally soft-and eerie-voice echoed thanks to the hard cave walls. As the three young cats each stepped forward, Spottedkit felt her mind start to wander, though not for long. She quickly snapped herself back to reality and watched with a mixture of awe and tension as Deadeye prepared to don the felines with their names. "Finpaw, do you promise to uphold The Gorge's warrior code, to show no mercy when protecting those residing

within this camp? Do you swear to defend our borders and pride to your last breath?"

"I do," Finpaw meowed proudly, although there was a slight waver in his tone.

"Then by my right as leader of The Gorge, I give you your warrior name. From this point on you will be known as Finclaw. May your *hunts* be generous and your prey short-lived." Spottedkit couldn't stop the shudder that coursed over her body; something inside her screamed that Deadeye wasn't exactly referring to the mice and rabbits they catch by the day. She took a peek at her siblings and saw that they clearly didn't feel the same way-they were watching with round eyes, in speechless awe of Deadeye on his perch. "Thornpaw, step forward. Do you promise to uphold The Gorge's warrior code, to show no mercy when protecting those residing within this camp? Do you swear to defend our borders and pride to your last breath?"

"I do." Thornpaw puffed out her chest, and her voice rang around the cave.

"Then by my right as leader of The Gorge, I give you your warrior name. From this point on you will be known as Thornheart. May your hunts be generous and your prey short-lived." Deadeye recited the same speech for Redpaw, but narrowed his one good eye at the response.

"I-I do." Though he displayed such obvious hesitation that the whole crowd began murmuring, determination flashed across Redpaw's eyes.

Deadeye was silent for a moment, and it was hard to tell whether he was waiting for the crowd to quiet down or if he was holding harsh words back. Just when Redpaw looked like he was about to burn up in embarrassment, he spoke, "Then by my right as leader of The Gorge, I give you your warrior name. From this point on you will be known as Redflight. May your hunts be generous and your prey short-lived." The crowd of cats immediately took up yowling the new warriors' names. Pride and enthusiasm filled the voices that now bounced off of the walls.

"Finclaw! Thornheart! Redflight! Finclaw! Thornheart! Redflight!" Deadeye flicked his tail for silence and his cold gaze traveled around the room until it landed abruptly on Spottedkit. The she-kit immediately felt her fur crawl under his harsh stare.

"Now," the dark tomcat began, drawing out the word, "I know this might come off as a bit *hasty* to some of you—" Deadeye shot a meaningful glance to a few cats, "—however, since we are just as short on fresh warriors as the four Clans, I have decided that these kits are old enough to start their apprentice training. It will only excel their learning and conduct as future warriors of The Gorge. Foxleap's kits, step forward." Spottedkit glanced nervously at Dustkit, who merely shrugged in response and walked forward with their brother and sister. She felt a gentle nudge as she hesitated-upon glancing behind her, she saw her mother giving her an encouraging glance. The golden kit turned back around and followed after her siblings carefully, stopping once all four were under Deadeye's perch. The oddly shaped rock filled her with an odd feeling; she couldn't quite decide if it were dread, awe, or both.

Deadeye stared down on them. Up close, his gaze was even more unsettling—moreso when he focused it directly on Spottedkit. She swore she could feel her skin burning up underneath her fur. "Spottedkit, until you receive your warrior name you will be known as Spottedpaw. Your mentor will be Hawkscar." Deadeye paused as Hawkscar padded up to Spottedpaw, reaching out to touch noses with her.

"You're a bit small for an apprentice," the cream-colored tom murmured jokingly. Spottedpaw felt a wave of relief crash over her-most kits in The Gorge don't often interact with the warriors, so one is never certain whether their mentor would be coldhearted or friendly. Deadeye's gaze rested on Spottedpaw for a moment longer before he continued.

"Dustkit, from this day until you receive your warrior name you will be known as Dustpaw. Your mentor will be Rocksplash." Once again, a pause while mentor and apprentice met. "Riverkit, from this day until you receive your warrior name you will be known as Riverpaw. Fireclaw will guide you on the path of a warrior." He watched as the dark-furred kit touched noses with the deep ginger

tabby; Riverpaw immediately moved to sit next to his brother and sister afterwards. "Fernkit, from this day forward until you receive your warrior name you will be known as Fernpaw. Your mentor will be Coldstep." The crowd's silence dragged on for a moment after the final pair touched noses, as if they were still recovering from the shock of the early apprentice naming ceremony. Slowly, the cats began chanting the names of the new apprentices.

"Spottedpaw! Dustpaw! Riverpaw! Fernpaw! Spottedpaw! Dustpaw! Riverpaw! Fernpaw!" Despite her previously uncomfortable state, Spottedpaw felt the tiniest bit of pride rising in her chest as her name was chanted. Slowly her tension ebbed away, but when she glanced at her siblings she noticed they shared an oddly ambitious glint in their eyes rather than one of pride. The chanting died down and Spottedpaw's faint feeling of pride was replaced by one of unease—her fur itched once again and she felt as though she was being watched. After giving a quick glance around the cave, she spotted Frostheart with his gaze locked on her. The apprentice did her best to shrug it off as her mentor nudged her and beckoned for her to follow him.

"Just because your apprenticeship ceremony came a little early doesn't mean I'll go easy on you," Hawkscar jested. "We're going to go right into the basics of being a warrior. Follow me." The tomcat didn't give Spottedpaw a chance to respond before whisking towards the training wing of the cave systems, where all new apprentices began their training before they could truly experience the world outside of the caves. The golden tabby hurried after him, though she still had room to grow and as a result had to move her legs nearly thrice as fast to keep up.

"Your first lesson," the cream cat called over his shoulder, "you cannot fall behind. You leave yourself vulnerable and possibly even a target to anycat and anything else that might be out there." As they entered the training sector, Hawkscar flipped around to face Spottedpaw without so much as a heads up-the young molly came skidding to a halt at the sudden action, nearly tripping over her own tail in the process.

"Second lesson," Hawkscar snapped without a moment of hesitation, "is to never let your guard down. If I were to turn on you

just now, I'd have you beat." Spottedpaw held her tongue and gave a hurried nod, but her gaze soon wandered off to new noises echoing in the training cave. In a corner opposite to her and her mentor were Riverpaw and Fernpaw and their mentors; the four of them had jumped straight into learning how to stalk prey and what appeared to be fighting. A pang of what felt like jealousy grew deep in the pit of her stomach. Hawkscar noticed her attention drift off and lifted his paw, nudging her nearly hard enough to tip her over.

"Come now," he murmured. "Those hot-headed warriors rush into everything and everyone ends up saving their tails. You'll get the same training in due time. You need some of that Gorge warrior knowledge in you first." Spottedpaw reigned her attention back in and gave a nod once again.

"That makes sense," she mumbled, albeit a little dejectedly. "If I don't have the knowledge I'll just make myself a target, right?" She remembered part of what the warrior had told her previously.

Hawkscar puffed his chest out a bit. "Looks like I got the bright one of the batch," he purred. The warmth and humor that Hawkscar carried in his tone made Spottedpaw feel much better about herself. "Seriously, though. Keep this up and you might be the first to get to experience some patrols." The kit lit up at the mention of patrols, and she eagerly paid attention to all of Hawkscar's lessons for the day.

After a countless sunrises of training, Spottedpaw was finally well versed in not only the basic warrior rules and tactics, but the basics of combat and hunting as well. As time went on, she grew more and more curious of the outside world-she'd heard stories from the elder of times before her own, and how every moon the Gorge would gather with all of the other Clans in the Gathering. She'd been told stories of hundreds of cats in one area, all at peace with each other and even congratulating other Clans for their new warriors. Spottedpaw heard tales of starlit ancestors who The Gorge no longer speak to; when Molestrike told her this specific story, her voice was hushed as though she was afraid to be heard speaking of

it. The apprentice was in awe of the idea of so many cats congregating in the name of starry ancestors—something inside her gave a twinge when she thought of the stories, though she didn't know what for.

Her siblings seemed to be handling apprenticeship just as well as she. There was a silent ambition shared between the four of them-they each wanted to be the first of the litter to experience the outside world. It was an unspoken guarantee from each apprentice to the other that they would not stop their training for even a second. This ongoing competition, much to Spottedpaw's relief, didn't stop them from holding a close bond as siblings. They would still wrestle near the fresh-kill pile and groom together; the second their mentors called for them, however, they bolted.

The four of them still had several moons left of training, and the warriors responsible for them were already starting to crack down on training. As Spottedpaw nibbled on a scrawny mouse, she heard what she now easily recognized as her mentor's heavy footsteps approaching her. She lifted her head from her meal and looked to the cream tomcat expectantly.

"I see that I don't even have to call for you anymore." Though several sunrises had passed, Hawkscar still managed to jest just about every time he spoke. He nudged her softly and beckoned with his tail. "It's time to test your hunting skills. Come along." Before the young apprentice could boast to her siblings, she saw their mentors beckoning them as well—each young cat puffing out their chest proudly in turn. Spottedpaw realized that both she and her littermates were finally getting the chance to venture out into the world. The four exchanged a glance, acknowledging that they were each ready to bring their sibling rivalry out of the caves and into the wilds at last.

"Where are we going, Hawkscar?" Spottedpaw asked, unable to keep her excitement from becoming visible. She twitched the tip of her tail and shuffled a bit on her paws. Her mentor twitched his whiskers in amusement.

"As I said, we're testing your hunting skills. You're all going to be hunting in different areas, and we will observe from a distance."

Without a pause, Hawkscar whisked towards the entrance of the cave system. For the first time, Spottedpaw felt anxiety well up within her rather than excitement—this was her first step into the world outside, but what if something happened to her? Or her brothers and sister? The elders spoke plenty of the old wars with the Clans and the land that Deadeye has won; what if the other Clans invaded?

Spottedpaw was so deep in her newfound worries that she hadn't realized she'd stopped right in the middle of the entrance tunnel. Dustpaw slammed into her tail and scoffed at her. "Come on, Spottedpaw," he muttered before giving her a shove. The she-cat immediately took up a quickened pace, catching up to her mentor before he got too far ahead. She had to ignore these fears of hers—this was her chance to improve beyond her littermates and impress her mentor and the rest of The Gorge.

Spottedpaw squinted harshly as the natural sunlight left her temporarily blinded. Once her eyes adjusted and she was able to view her surroundings, she froze in her spot. The outside world was much more magnificent than what she could have imagined—by leaps and bounds, even. She didn't have to see her siblings to know that they, too, were awestruck by what they were seeing.

Sounds they had only ever heard faintly rang through the forest; plants and landforms they had only known through the tales of the elders, with their hushed voices as they spun tales for the apprentices, surrounded them. The litter was snapped from their daze as their mentors nudged briskly them onward.

"Come," Fireclaw muttered. "You're out here to hunt, not gawk at a few beetles." No more words were spoken as the group moved carefully along the ridge leading away from the camp. Now that her sense of awe had been snatched away, Spottedpaw was painfully aware of the sheer drop into the river below them.

"Don't look into the river, just look ahead of you and don't stop walking." The group slowly followed the ledge up away from the cliff and into the safety of the forest, where Hawkscar led them deeper until they reached a small clearing. The cats stopped in the center—as they came to their halt, Spottedpaw became aware of all

the sounds of the forest singing together. Birds chirping and leaves rustling around them made the forest itself seem alive. She was once again in awe at sounds and sights she had never even imagined before today.

The four mentors had sat in front of their apprentices. Hawkscar cleared his throat and Spottedpaw returned her attention to them. "As we said before," the tomcat murmured, "we're testing your hunting skills today. We'll lead each of you into different spots in the forest and you'll show us what you've been able to learn inside the camp." The warriors each gave the others a look and turned away from one another, leading the kits into the forest. Hawkscar flicked his tail at Spottedpaw as if beckoning her after him, and the golden-pelted she-kit was quick to follow. Once they had reached what, to Hawkscar, was an appropriate distance away, he sat down in the brushes. "Your assessment starts now."

Spottedpaw looked to him, immediately drawing a blank; all she received in return was a dead stare. It didn't take her long to realize she would get no pointers, so she turned to the forest without a word. She tried taking one more glance back at her teacher only to discover he had vanished without a sound-she knew, however, that he would be watching her every move. The pressure was on, and it was time for her to impress.

There was no time for Spottedpaw to lose. One misstep, one wrong move and her siblings would come out ahead and she knew she'd never hear the end of it. The young cat paused, taking in the scents around her; all of the new scents were so overwhelming, the task at hand seemed nearly impossible. Spottedpaw scanned the forest around her without moving a muscle. The rustle of a leaf here, a twig dropping from the trees above there, she put every ounce of energy she had into listening and watching her surroundings.

And then, a familiar smell. What was it? Not a thrush, nor vole . . . perhaps squirrel? A twig snapped and she directed all her attention towards it—*there*. It was a surprisingly plump squirrel, too, carelessly lumbering about the forest floor. Without a sound, Spottedpaw dropped to a crouch while trying to remember her teachings.

'Stay downwind, or else it'll smell you before you have a chance to pounce. Keep your haunches low to the ground, glide through the foliage with the ease of the streams. And then . . . leap.'

Her mentor's words stuck with her, and she praised herself for her sharp memory. It was just Spottedpaw's luck that she started downwind of the creature, now she just had to make sure it stayed that way. Slowly, she began creeping forward through the brush-stopping every few seconds to make sure the squirrel had not heard or seen her. Just a few pawsteps closer, and she'd be close enough to go for the pounce. As she grew closer, she got too excited and felt a twig snap under her paw and, in turn, a pit formed in her stomach. The squirrel froze in its spot; so did she. She felt her fur heating up as she grew anxious. This squirrel might very well be her only chance in today's assessment.

After a few more painful seconds it seemed as though the squirrel went back to its business. Spottedpaw crept forward a few more inches and pounced, landing right on top of the small animal and delivering the killing blow quickly. Before she could bury it somewhere safe, Fernpaw burst out of the undergrowth looking panicked. Spottedpaw could hear every possible catch in the nearest vicinity flee from the sudden noise and turned on her sister.

"Mouse-brain, you just scared off all the prey!" she spat, her fur bristling up.

"Shut up," Fernpaw fretted. "It's Dustpaw. He accidentally crossed the border and ran into a SwiftClan patrol! Come, quick!" Without another word, the ginger-furred apprentice pelted back the way she came. Spottedpaw, though skeptical, picked up her lone catch and followed after her littermate carefully. She had heard from the other warriors in the caves about the tension between SwiftClan and the Gorge. If Dustpaw really had crossed some of them, it might not end well.

As she drew closer to Fernpaw, new scents overwhelmed her-foreign, unknown scents. She stepped through the greenery and saw Dustpaw, arched over a mouse he had caught, facing five strange cats. Their other littermates were there as well, along with the mentors. The animosity between the cats was nearly tangible, the

air heavy over them all. Spottedpaw quietly put her squirrel down at her paws and sat timidly behind the rest.

"Five is excessive for a border patrol, is it not, Grassheart?" Hawkscar was the first to speak, his voice colder than Spottedpaw had ever heard. "Especially with a fine deputy such as yourself in tow." A large, light tabby tom growled in response and stepped forward. Tensions grew even thicker between the cats; both sides were bristled with claws at the ready.

"Hardly big enough when patrolling our border with the Gorge," his deep voice echoed off the trees. A dappled she-cat next to him bristled, and a Siamese she-cat bared her teeth at the Gorge cats. The tom, whom Spottedpaw assumed was Grassheart, looked at each of the littermates. "Is Deadeye so desperate now that he's enlisting mere kits for training?" It was the Gorge warriors' turn to be offended this time.

"Don't speak on Deadeye," Coldstep hissed, crouching as if ready to pounce. "How he runs the Gorge is our business, not yours." Within moments, all cats were ready to leap at each other, claws bared—all except Hawkscar and Grassheart.

"This kit stole prey from our territory," the Siamese molly snarled. Grassheart gave her a meaningful look, and Hawkscar tapped Coldstep with his tail.

"You would do well to teach your clanmates to be as . . . level-headed as you, Hawkscar." Grassheart flicked his ears, and the SwiftClan cats around him backed up a pace or two. "It would also not be harmless for your apprentices to know where the borders lie. We'll overlook this incident this time, and you can keep the mouse; make sure it doesn't happen again. Others might not be so forgiving." He waved his tail and the cats around him started retreating into their territory. Grassheart himself took an extra moment, looking at each of the Gorge cats in turn as if to remember their faces—locking eyes with Spottedpaw, as if it were supposed to be a meaningful look, and retreated after his own clanmates.

Spottedpaw heard Fireclaw start to mutter something in response, but Hawkscar cut him off with a harsh nudge. "We'll have

none of that in front of apprentices. Be grateful that it was resolved without bloodshed." He looked at the rest of the cats and shook out his pelt. "Let's call it a day and return to the camp. Riverpaw, Fernpaw, go collect anything you've caught. Fireclaw, Coldstep, go with them." The four cats bounded off into the forest, and the four who remained took up a slow pace back to the caves. There wasn't a word shared between them; Rocksplash's dissatisfaction with Dustpaw resonated in the air and made them all far too uncomfortable for small talk.

Once they arrived near the caves, the four stopped and waited for the rest of the party. Dustpaw finally broke the awkward silence that hung over them after dropping his catch. "I didn't steal it from their territory, you know," he muttered.

"You can't say that for sure, kit," Rocksplash hissed. "You lot don't even know the borders yet. You're hardly out of the nest yet!"

"M-Maybe not. But I noticed the stench when I crossed it, I was only a tail length over because the mouse ran there from *our* territory!" The brown tom bristled in defiance, and he raised his chin at his mentor. The tortoiseshell molly growled and swiped a paw over his head.

"Then you stole from their territory. That's just how it works, you insolent brat. And for what, a scrawny little mouse?" Spottedpaw opened her mouth to protest, but a quick look from Hawkscar stopped her—so she continued to sit quietly with her prey. Much to her dismay, however, her silence caught Rocksplash's attention. "Why can't you be more like your sister over here? She's so well behaved. Didn't cross the border *and* she caught us a juicy squirrel. Ne'er a peep out of her, either." The dappled golden molly felt her fur burn from embarrassment as she caught a hot glare from her brother. Spottedpaw could only hope he knew she didn't intend to be compared to him, nor for him to be scolded so harshly for a mistake.

After what felt like an excruciating eternity, the four other cats returned to them and the group made their way into the caves. Each kit went to put their prey on the now-empty fresh-kill pile—Spottedpaw saw that Riverpaw had managed a decent-sized rabbit,

and Fernpaw had caught two thrushes. Spottedpaw spied their father watching from just outside the warriors' den, his scar-covered golden pelt ever noticeable. He never approached them about their training, though; their mother was no better. Briefly, she wondered if life in the other Clans was like this, but she quickly shook off the thought. She'd surely be scorned should she ever voice something like that.

Hawkscar and Coldstep beckoned the litter over to where the mentors had gathered. The four littermates, albeit somewhat hesitantly, headed over to the warriors and sat in front of them. Dustpaw sat with a defiant glint in his eye, and Spottedpaw eyed him carefully.

Fireclaw cleared his throat, speaking for the first time that day. "Despite some . . . *minor issues,* you four did well for your first time outside of the caves." Spottedpaw felt Dustpaw tense up beside her, clearly still flustered from the day's events. "We've come to the decision of who did best today, and I'm proud to say it's Riverpaw." The ginger tom puffed out his chest smugly, as if it had been a competition among mentors rather than an assessment of apprentices. "You're all free to rest for the rest of the night, and take your catch as your meal for the day. Dustpaw, go talk to Frozenleaf and make sure you've got no injuries from your blunder into that SwiftClan patrol." Dustpaw let out a huff and stomped off towards the medicine den, but not before getting in one more sharp glare at Spottedpaw.

The golden tabby she-kit shook off her unease and fetched her squirrel from the pile. She trudged to a small corner by the apprentices' den and settled down on the cold stone floor. As she quietly picked at her meal, she felt the presence of another and, upon looking up, saw her mentor.

"Hawkscar? Is there something I forgot to do?" she mewed quizzically, tilting her head.

The cream tom chuckled and shook his head. "No, no. Not at all. I just wanted you to know you did well today," he murmured reassuringly. "And ignore your brother's glares, he'll sulk for a while and be back to normal. You do understand why I stopped you, no?"

After he got nothing but a confused stare, he continued in a hushed voice. "The behavior you saw earlier was . . . typical for the other mentors. I don't agree with those teachings, but if you had spoken out I'd have had no choice."

"I think I understand," Spottedpaw murmured. Right as her mentor turned to leave, she spoke up. "Hey, Hawkscar?" He turned around and gave her a curious look. "Are the other Clans like this, too?"

Hawkscar chuckled, then glanced around quickly and beckoned to her with his tail. "You know, I might as well show you all of our borders after today. Come along." Though now thoroughly confused, Spottedpaw followed him out of the caves and into the darkening outside world. "The river outside the cave marks the very end of our territory. It borders no other territory, and there is simply . . . nothing for us beyond it." He led her through the territory, showing her all of the other Clans' borders until they reached the spot from earlier, and he sat down there.

They were both silent for a few moments, Spottedpaw standing next to her mentor awkwardly as he sat at the border. "This," he murmured, "is the SwiftClan border. We're not permitted to speak of it under Deadeye's orders, but you should know that we are very different from the other Clans, Spottedpaw. There isn't much I can say-not yet, at least, and certainly not here. I'll see if I can't convince Deadeye to bring you to the next Gathering. You and your littermates are exceptionally young for apprentices, and he doesn't often bring apprentices, but it might be allowed. You'll be able to see, then." Spottedpaw tilted her head, but said nothing. "Let's head back to the camp, then. Don't forget the scents of the borders, either. We don't want another incident like earlier." With that, the two cats padded back to the camp and settled for the night.

<A/N Hey, guys! Long time no see, eh? The first few chapters of this are pretty short, but they get longer if you stick with it. ♡ I'm currently rewriting this from the ground up to practice my plotting and character development, so feel free to leave critiques! See you next week!>

Chapter 2

[image]

The crisp air chilled Spottedpaw nearly to the bone. The full moon illuminated the forest in such a way she couldn't have imagined. The throng of cats surrounding her, pelts brushing against each other as they traveled to the Gathering spot. Hawkscar stayed close to the apprentice throughout the journey, nudging her in the correct direction when necessary. The warrior hadn't been wrong when he said getting her into the Gathering wouldn't be easy. Chills ran down her spine as she recalled their recent discussion with Deadeye.

"Do you know just what you're asking of me, Hawkscar?" Deadeye hadn't even turned around to face the two cats. "I'm quite strict about our rules regarding who attends the Gatherings, and apprentices have not been permitted for many moons."

"Yes, sir," Hawkscar bowed his head meekly, "but I do think it would be a good opportunity . . . for our apprentices to learn how to interact with the other Clans. We could teach them how to gather intel for you, as well." At that, Deadeye turned to face them. He was silent for a few moments, his sharp gaze piercing the two cats in front of him.

Finally, he spoke. "This is why I've always valued you as an asset to the Gorge, Hawkscar. I like how you think." There was a pause—it was the most uncomfortable Spottedpaw had ever been as the tomcat stared her down. "Very well. I'll allow her—and only her—to attend, for now. This better not go poorly." The black tom flicked his tail to dismiss them, and the two cats quickly left his den.

Spottedpaw flicked her ears, pushing the memory out of her mind for the time being. All different scents had started filling her nose, scents she faintly recognized from Hawkscar's border lessons; this time, they all seemed smashed together, and she realized they must be nearing the Gathering center. A glance to her mentor and a nod in return confirmed her suspicion. Upon reaching the location,

Deadeye and the rest of the cats stopped just outside the threshold of the clearing ahead.

The golden molly gave her mentor a quizzical look, who chuckled in return. "He's just assessing which Clans brought which members tonight. He'll lead us inside in just a moment." Though she knew he was only trying to reassure her, Spottedpaw felt far more anxious than before. She knew one wrong move and Deadeye would likely be furious not only with her, but with her mentor as well. There was no telling what the repercussions for such a thing would be; legends from the elders in the Gorge suggested Deadeye was not merciful with those who crossed him. A soft nudge to her shoulder pulled her out of her concerns—she saw Hawkscar giving her an amused look, as if silently laughing at her. "Relax. You'll do fine once we get in there," he purred.

Deadeye gave a flick of his tail and the throng of cats began pouring through the brushes. Spottedpaw was quick to follow, desperately trying to stick next to her mentor. What sat beyond the foliage amazed her—more cats than she had ever imagined in one spot, and yet this was only a portion of the cats in all the Clans. Hawkscar led the apprentice to the outer edge of where the cats from the Gorge gathered, close in proximity to a particularly dry scent that was unmistakably BlazeClan.

"Hawkscar, what if—"

The cream tom cut her off. "Just follow my lead and you'll be just fine, enough of that worrying." The molly was about to speak up again when she spotted a few BlazeClan cats padding up to them.

"Hawkscar," a dark brown tabby greeted casually. "It's been a few moons since I've spotted you at a Gathering." Hawkscar dipped his head in return and flicked at Spottedpaw with his tail, inviting her to copy him. The golden-furred apprentice quickly followed suit as her cheeks heated up in embarrassment. The stiffness of the movement only brought attention to her. "And who is this new pelt? Have you finally earned yourself an apprentice?"

"Indeed, I have. Swallowclaw, Jayleaf, this is Spottedpaw.

Spottedpaw, these are some old acquaintances of mine." The apprentice anxiously greeted them once more with a bow of her head.

"Doesn't she seem rather small for an apprentice?" the other cat, a grey tabby, questioned; an inquiry that quickly earned him a playful cuff over the head from Hawkscar. The comment made Spottedpaw's fur burn in humiliation, and she groomed her chest fur self-consciously.

"She might be small, but any apprentice of mine could leave you in the dust," the tom joked. "Isn't that right, Spottedpaw?" He nudged the young cat with his paw in an attempt to get her to relax.

"Y-Yeah," she stammered, slowly getting more comfortable with her surroundings. "You wouldn't even stand a chance." She puffed her chest out playfully at the warriors, who all chuckled in return. As the three toms carried on a conversation, Spottedpaw zoned their voices out and listened to the buzzing of the crowds around her. She had never imagined such different cats could simply gather here and . . . get along so well. Despite the overall friendly atmosphere, she did pick up on quite a bit of tension specifically between the rest of the Clans and the Gorge. Spottedpaw was ripped from her thoughts as she felt a new gaze burning into her pelt—she looked around and spotted a group of younger cats watching her with wide eyes. *Are these apprentices from the other Clans?* she wondered warily. As she met their curious gazes, they were quick to look away. Even so, Spottedpaw still felt a cat's gaze, but upon looking around her the feeling vanished and the culprit was nowhere to be seen. *Perhaps I'm just imagining things.*

"Would you like to go sit with the other apprentices?" Hawkscar questioned with a nudge. Spottedpaw realized he must have noticed the apprentice glancing around apprehensively. "They might be curious at first—Deadeye doesn't usually bring apprentices to Gatherings, any cat would be curious." He wasn't wrong about that much; Spottedpaw had noticed curious gazes set on her from all around the clearing, along with whispers and murmurs.

"I think I'm fine where I am." Her voice was hardly a whisper as

she got comfortable next to her mentor. "I-If you don't mind, of course," she added hastily when she realized her mistake. Perhaps Hawkscar had wanted her to leave him to speak among other warriors.

An amused purr from the warrior eased her worries yet again. "Of course it's fine, you furball. These two will make you feel more welcome than those apprentices would, anyway." She peered around Hawkscar again at the two strange warriors, suddenly feeling much more shy than before. Her stomach was twisting and turning with anxiety—a feeling that only welled up to her chest when she saw Jayleaf staring at her. Was her fur messed up somewhere? Or perhaps there was something on her face? Once more she started hastily grooming herself in case her concerns were true.

Swallowclaw noticed and snorted in amusement. "See, Jayleaf? This is what happens when you stare, you've got the poor kit all flustered and nervous." Jayleaf's eyes widened in what Spottedpaw thought was embarrassment and he straightened himself up. She heard Swallowclaw let out a wheeze of laughter as the grey tabby mumbled apologetically. "You'd think you were a newborn kit with how you were staring," he continued to tease his Clanmate and Spottedpaw couldn't help but let out an amused mrrow. She felt herself slowly relax as the group chittered away; the Gathering cast nearly everyone's worries aside, if only for a short while.

A yowl from the leaders' perch drew silence over the Gathering. *This is it,* Spottedpaw thought, mystified. *The leaders are going to finally speak. Will Deadeye announce my apprenticeship, or my littermates'?* As soon as the thought hit her, Spottedpaw found herself secretly wishing she wouldn't be singled out. She had already faced backlash from her siblings; they didn't understand why they couldn't attend the Gathering with their sister.

"Deadeye wants to try out a new system," Hawkscar had reassured them. "I'm sure you all will get a chance next moon. I'll even put in a good word for you." The three apprentices held their tongues after that, but Spottedpaw knew they were still giving her foul stares. Even the three newest warriors and her littermates' mentors had been brought along.

Announcements from the leaders shook her back to reality. Though the five leaders sat together on the ancient-looking boulder that was their perch, there was an obvious gap between Deadeye and the rest. Spottedpaw wasn't given enough time to question it—a brown tabby had already started with her announcements, and a meaningful glance from Hawkscar silenced any doubt she held.

"All is well in NightClan," the tabby molly reported gratefully. "We have three new warriors; Brightleap, Leopardstep, and Mintnose!" Spottedpaw heard cats all around her cheer the new warriors names. She noticed that some cats from the Gorge had been reluctant, and a few had not even bothered to join in. Her gaze darted back to the leaders nervously, but if they had noticed they gave nothing away. "Twolegs have been playing with their kits in some of the thinner areas of the forest, but they never stick around too long. These ones have a dog with them." A warning glance was shared between leaders, leaving Spottedpaw confused. She'd heard tales of dogs chasing cats, but were they so dangerous that the leaders needed to warn one another of them?

Another leader stepped forward before Spottedpaw could finish her pondering. "Thank you, Harestar," a brown tom dipped his head. "Things are going well in RushClan, as well. Our medicine cat apprentice has earned his full name, and will now be known as Sunclaw." He paused while the Clans cheered in approval. Once the noise settled, he continued. "The streams and rivers have been rising a bit, but that's to be expected for the season. They simply bring fresher water for us all." The leader bowed his head to the remaining cats, and Spottedpaw noticed Deadeye made no move to speak yet. A black molly shrugged and took a small step forward.

"Jayleaf and Birdheart have earned their first apprentices, Canyonpaw and Echopaw." Once again there was a pause as the cats cheered. Next to Spottedpaw and her mentor, Jayleaf was puffing his chest out proudly. She realized with a quick glance at Hawkscar that it must be a big deal, to get your first apprentice. "Spiderclaw has also finally kitted, and we have two strong additions to the Clan." The dark molly ended with an approving purr, nodding to the remaining two toms as she stepped back. The clearing fell silent as the two exchanged a look; Deadeye kept his

gaze cool, yet unnervingly friendly at the same time.

"You go on ahead, Fishstar," Spottedpaw heard her leader purr, and she shuddered softly. Beside her, she noticed Hawkscar tense slightly. Was this side of Deadeye as new to him as it was to her? *Maybe he recognizes this behavior,* she wondered.

Fishstar hesitantly stepped forward as he flicked his ears with uncertainty. "Things are just as well in SwiftClan territory as the others. Prey has been running thin, but it's been a wet season and the marshes have grown thick. Once it dries up, we expect to see more." He paused as his gaze swept the gathered cats, as if searching for something. "Juniperstorm is expecting kits and has moved to the nursery." He stepped back, his unease showing more awkwardly than Deadeye's odd behavior. Spottedpaw noticed that below the leaders and their deputies, the medicine cats huddled together nervously—all except Frozenleaf and Shortpaw, who sat a few tail lengths away from the others.

"The Gorge has been thriving." Deadeye didn't move from his spot. His gaze raked over the cats in the clearing with a glint of emotion—was that contempt? "We have three new warriors—Redflight, Finclaw, and Thornheart." The black tom paused pointedly, clearly expecting the Clans to cheer for his warriors. The cheers this time were weaker from the other Clans, but the cats from the Gorge cheered louder than ever. Spottedpaw saw the three warriors in the crowd nearly bursting with pride. "We also have new apprentices. Spottedpaw, Dustpaw, Fernpaw, and Riverpaw." Deadeye hadn't even mentioned that she was there, yet countless curious eyes had locked onto Spottedpaw. She felt her pelt bristle up and suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious next to her mentor. To her right side, she even noticed that her littermates' mentors were watching her closely, as if waiting for her to make a wrong move.

Whispers began rippling through the crowd like a soft breeze. Even the leaders, who had been well composed for the entire Gathering, were now curiously searching the crowd for Spottedpaw. There was a soft gasp from a couple of them, and Deadeye narrowed his eye.

"Is there a problem?" he questioned, a challenge deep within his voice. The whispers ceased at once as all the attention was, much to Spottedpaw's relief, once again directed at the leaders.

"She's still the size of a kit," the black she-cat from before mewed in shock. "Is this how you run the Gorge now, Deadeye?"

"Who are you to question my methods, Heatherstar?" Deadeye retorted, though he stayed eerily calm. "The size of my apprentices is a nonissue. They'll be twice as formidable as any of your warriors once I'm through with them." Spottedpaw felt her bones chill at those words. Was that supposed to be a threat to the other Clans, or to *her?* She found herself instinctively pressing against Hawkscar, who merely cleared his throat and inched away. The two warriors next to Hawkscar had tensed up as well, and Jayleaf was casting glances between the leaders and Spottedpaw.

Heatherstar's hackles raised defensively. "First you take land that isn't yours, land that you don't need. Now you've got kits as apprentices and you're threatening me?" The tension in the air was thicker than ever before. Spottedpaw glanced awkwardly at her newfound BlazeClan acquaintances, only to find Swallowclaw heading back to his own Clanmates. Jayleaf gave Spottedpaw and Hawkscar an uneasy nod before following the warrior. Looking back to the leaders' rock, Spottedpaw thought she saw amusement glinting in Deadeye's remaining eye. *Was he after this reaction from the start?* She looked to her mentor for any kind of a hint, but his eyes were emotionless as he watched on.

"My, my, that's quite the response," Deadeye purred. He glanced up as clouds started drifting over the full moon. "Careful, Heatherstar," he mewed teasingly. "You'll upset StarClan with an outrage like that." Spottedpaw could see as well as any other cat that Heatherstar desperately wanted to swipe at Deadeye, but even a leader wouldn't break the truce at the Gathering.

"We're finished here." The black-furred leader spoke only in a low growl. The four other leaders immediately hopped off of the boulder and called their Clanmates away. Deadeye waited a moment before doing the same with the Gorge, his whiskers still twitching with amusement. As Spottedpaw turned to follow her

Clanmates home she felt eyes burning into the back of her pelt once again, but she was too exhilarated by what she'd just witnessed to care anymore.

The chill of dawn tickled at Spottedpaw's toes. In the days following the Gathering, her littermates had begun pestering her to tell them how it went—truthfully, she didn't even know where to start. Though it had been several sunrises already, her mind was still reeling from what she'd experienced. She knew her siblings could tell something big had happened.

"What was it?" Riverpaw had breathed excitedly. "Did a Clan break the truce?"

"Obviously not, mousebrain," their sister jabbed him with her paw. "If someone broke the truce we'd be going to battle now, I bet." Still, Fernpaw gazed expectantly at Spottedpaw. Before she could respond, Hawkscar had padded up to the litter.

"That's enough of that. There's plenty of gossip in the camp without the apprentices adding to it," he meowed sternly. After the apprentices glanced at each other in embarrassment, he continued. "I spoke with Deadeye. He agreed to let the rest of you join in the next Gathering, so long as you promise to be on your best behavior. Your mentors will tell you how to behave." Spottedpaw's siblings immediately brightened up, each scampering off to their mentor. Once they left, Hawkscar turned to his apprentice. "You did well, considering how things went," he murmured lightheartedly. Spottedpaw could tell he was trying to cover up his distress at what had happened.

"Did Deadeye really steal territory from the other Clans?" Spottedpaw couldn't help the words escaping her, and she burned shamefully afterwards. Hawkscar gave a soft snort.

"Of course not," he murmured a bit quickly, then added, "Things happen. Sometimes Clans battle each other, and it's not uncommon for territory to be tossed around for the taking."

"Why did the other Clans seem so suspici—"

"Apprentices shouldn't ask so many questions," the tom interrupted her with a meaningful flick of his ears. Spottedpaw gave a small huff, but silenced herself obediently. There was so much she knew she couldn't possibly understand—not after the events at the Gathering. "Go on and get some fresh-kill. We're going on a border patrol at dusk." The apprentice twitched her tail and trotted to the fresh-kill pile, finding a tasty looking thrush. As she picked it up, she heard some hushed murmurs around the corner of the Smoothstone, where Deadeye holds the Gorge meetings. Curiosity getting the best of her, Spottedpaw settled down and dug into her thrush absentmindedly; she kept her ears pricked as she listened in on the conversation.

"Has StarClan shared with you at all?" Irritation edged Deadeye's growl.

"I've told you already, Deadeye, I haven't heard from them in moons. If they had something to tell me, they would have." It was Frozenleaf. She sounded just as irritated as their leader.

"They're hiding something from me." There was a pause for a second, where Spottedpaw imagined the cats were exchanging looks. "Fishstar was basically searching the entire Gathering for something—or some cat. Every other cat stayed even further away from us than before."

"Perhaps that's because of your endless taunting," Frozenleaf stated matter-of-factly. "And it doesn't help that you *still* insist on keeping your warrior name, instead of taking on your leader name." There was a final growl from Deadeye and he stomped away loudly. Spottedpaw dropped her gaze to the ground as he passed, pretending as if she hadn't noticed him there. She didn't know what all of this StarClan talk meant—the elders only told tall tales, and Hawkscar and the other warriors never mentioned much about their ancestors. Still, she knew if the other Clans were hiding things, it couldn't be good news.

Chapter 3

Spottedpaw wove through the underbrush delicately; her mouth was parted as she searched for a trace of prey. Though it had been several sunrises since she'd overheard the conversation between Deadeye and Frozenleaf, the words nagged at the back of her mind. Something about the exchange felt off and Spottedpaw felt deep in her gut that she should be suspicious of it. With a flick of her ears, the apprentice brought her attention back to the task at hand. She knew she couldn't afford to worry about such things when the Gorge needed food.

The fresh scent of squirrel caught the entirety of her attention. She froze, scanning the forest around her for any sign of the prey. A snap of a twig, a twitch of a leaf—she knew she'd find what she was after quickly enough. Just like that there was a squirrel in her sights. It was rather skinny and Spottedpaw almost considered leaving it for another, plumper catch, but for a split second she remembered just how empty the fresh-kill pile had been recently and decided against it. The squirrel froze where it was rummaging among the leaves and in its moment of hesitation, Spottedpaw pounced. She delivered a quick blow to its neck and ended it swiftly. After giving it a quick sniff, she buried it by a nearby tree and continued on her hunt. The apprentice turned around and stalked back into the undergrowth—almost immediately picking up the scent of vole. Her mouth watered as soon as she spotted it. The prey was especially plump for a vole and she was sure it would make a nice addition to her scrawny squirrel. She dropped into a crouch, creeping forward silently. Right as she was about to leap, the bushes nearby rustled and a flash of brown fur emerged, scaring away her catch.

"Mouse-dung!" Spottedpaw cursed softly and teared at the grass with her claws. She spun angrily on the culprit of all the noise and was startled when she saw her brother's amber eyes glistening in amusement. "Dustpaw? Couldn't you see I was about to catch that?" The golden molly couldn't stop her tail from twitching in agitation.

"It's just a stupid *vole,"* her littermate muttered with a roll of his eyes. "You can always catch another one."

Spottedpaw let out an annoyed growl. "What are you doing, anyways? *You* know Rocksplash will be furious if she sees us sitting around like lazy kittypets." She remembered the first day that they had gone hunting and how harshly Rocksplash had scolded Dustpaw—from the brief flash of anger in her brother's eyes, she knew he remembered as well.

"Relax, scaredy-mouse." Despite the anger she had seen so clearly, Dustpaw maintained his composure. "I just had an honest question. That's all. Besides, Rocksplash is all the way in the middle of the forest. She won't pay attention to me the same way Hawkscar pays attention to you." Spottedpaw bristled in protest as Dustpaw expressed his jealousy. *It's not my fault his mentor is a fox-heart,* she thought sourly. She was far beyond annoyed at this point—the tip of her tail was twitching in irritation. Realizing it was pointless to argue with her brother, she gave her pelt a shake and gave a sigh.

"Fine. What question could be *so* important that you had to scare away all of the mice in the forest?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really." Dustpaw ran a paw over his whiskers coolly and kept his gaze locked on Spottedpaw. The she-cat was immediately suspicious, realizing the game he was trying to play. "I saw you, though. I saw you eavesdropping on Deadeye and Frozenleaf."

Shock coursed through Spottedpaw. How could he have seen her? She had been so certain that she was hiding her intentions. Dustpaw watched her expectantly, and in return she eyed him warily. "I don't know what you're talking about," she muttered after a quiet pause.

"Yeah, right," the brown tom scoffed, "and hedgehogs can fly. You're a terrible liar, you know. Even if I had been bluffing, you would have given it away just now." His whiskers twitched in amusement and he leaned closer to his sister. "So? Spill the details. Whatever you heard, I know it must have been pretty serious."

"I-I don't think I should talk about it," Spottedpaw stammered. "I shouldn't have been listening in the first place. Besides, if they wanted other cats to hear what they had to say, I'm sure they would have spoken up." Dustpaw's prying eyes weighed down on her; she felt as though she were being crushed and, after several uncomfortable moments later, she caved. "Fine," she confessed, "Deadeye thinks the other Clans are hiding something from him. They didn't really say much about it, but he thinks they're searching for something that he doesn't know about." When Dustpaw still watched her expectantly, she quickly added, "Frozenleaf just thinks he's paranoid because he won't take on StarClan's given leader nam–"

The other apprentice interrupted with a fit of laughter. "StarClan? Hasn't Hawkscar taught you anything?" he snorted. "Rocksplash says that's just a bunch of nursery tales so that the queens can make their kits behave. All the other warriors agree, too!" Spottedpaw stared at him incredulously. Even though they hadn't been taught much about what exactly StarClan was, she felt deeply insulted.

"If that's true, why would Deadeye ask Frozenleaf if she'd been speaking to the–"

"That's quite enough out of the two of you." A new, stern voice interrupted her this time. The cream pelt of her mentor emerged from the undergrowth. "You're supposed to be hunting, not gossiping about who said what in the camp. Dustpaw, I know that Rocksplash has trained you better than that—or should I make a complaint about you distracting my apprentice from her duties while you deliberately ignore your own?" His hard amber gaze became fixated on the brown tom, who ducked his head shamefully in return.

"N-No, Hawkscar," Dustpaw muttered bitterly. "It won't happen again."

"I'll see to it that it doesn't." Hawkscar whisked his tail in dismissal and Dustpaw scampered off into the forest. As soon as Dustpaw vanished, Hawkscar turned his scolding gaze on Spottedpaw. "Eavesdropping on our leader and healer is bad

enough," he started, "but gossiping about it to other apprentices? You know better than that." His unforgiving tone made Spottedpaw heat up in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, Hawkscar," she mumbled ever so quietly. She wouldn't admit how pressured she'd felt under her brother's hard stare. *I'm sure it's why he's so upset with me. A good warrior would* never *succumb to pressure like that,* she thought sadly.

"I'm disappointed in you, Spottedpaw." The tom continued as though he hadn't heard her apology. "I clearly need to revisit my lesson about the codes we uphold in the Gorge, and much more thoroughly this time around." Having been used to his usual lightheartedness and jokes, the seriousness of his voice unnerved Spottedpaw. There was an uncomfortable silence that hung over them and Spottedpaw held his fierce gaze for what felt like an eternity. "Return to your hunting. I want to see the fresh-kill pile twice the size that it usually is." Without another word he bounded off into the forest, the undergrowth quickly hiding any trace of him. Shame still burning into her pelt, Spottedpaw turned and resumed her previous hunt. She was determined to, at the very least, impress her mentor with good catches.

Spottedpaw trudged into camp with her tail hung low. She had caught more prey than usual, but once she had met up with the rest of the patrol she saw that her mentor's expression was unreadable. Both she and Dustpaw were carrying almost too much prey to hold —while she somehow felt worse than when she had gotten scolded, her brother seemed all too proud of himself. Rocksplash was no different. The tortoiseshell she-cat puffed her chest out as she strutted along with her catches. The returning patrol donated their kills to what remained of the fresh-kill pile.

As they dropped the prey she turned hopefully to Hawkscar. The tom, however, merely looked past her. He padded past her and towards his fellow warriors, who were all resting inside a smooth dip in the cave floor. Depressed at the rejection and suddenly weary on her paws, she turned and headed to the apprentices' cave. Spottedpaw nosed her way through the nests until she found her

own and collapsed into it.

"You'll never believe what I heard today."

Spottedpaw hadn't realized her siblings were in the den with her. The three of them were off in a corner, murmuring softly among themselves. She peeked at them over the edge of her nest with her ears pricked curiously—there was no doubt Dustpaw was telling them what he had heard from her, but why was he so excited about it?

"Basically, the other Clans are totally planning something . . . ." Both of their remaining littermates visibly fidgeted as Dustpaw explained. Fernpaw grew more and more curious, leaning forward with her eyes wide. Riverpaw, on the other hand, appeared far more nervous. "You know what this means, right?" When neither apprentice responded, Dustpaw carried on. "This is our chance to make our mentors proud. We go into the enemy's territory and find out what they're hiding!"

"Oh, I bet it's something *nefarious!"* Fernpaw gasped, her ginger fur sticking up.

"Something totally wicked and evil!" Dustpaw agreed excitedly. His claws tore at the cave floor beneath him and created an unbearable sound. Spottedpaw shrunk further into her nest and pawed at her ears as the noise caused her physical discomfort.

"What about Spottedpaw? Shouldn't she be in on this too?" Though Fernpaw had dropped her voice to a whisper, it wasn't enough to escape Spottedpaw.

"Forget her," Dustpaw growled, lashing his tail. "She's too mouse-hearted. Besides, Hawkscar is so keen on training her more than us, he'd notice right away!"

"I think you two are complete mouse-brains," Riverpaw mumbled crossly. "Do you realize how moronic this idea is? What, we'll just strut into Clan territory—and I'll pretend that you know which Clan, even though you *don't*—and sneak around until we find out *if* they're hiding something? You don't even know for sure if

they're hiding something; this is a bunch of stupid rumors. Our mentors wouldn't be proud, they'd be ashamed." There was a pause, and when Riverpaw spoke again he sounded more lighthearted. "You should know, Dustpaw. You have the meanest mentor in all of the Gorge—all of the *world,* even!" Soft snickers arose from both Fernpaw and Riverpaw.

Without a single hesitation, Dustpaw tackled Riverpaw. What seemed to be a scuffle of disagreement quickly turned into noisy play-fighting as the two toms tumbled around the cave. Spottedpaw turned over in her nest in an attempt to ignore her littermates. Exhaustion weighed on her heavily; she felt as though her pelt was full of water, pulling her deeper into her nest. A sharp prod to her side made her even more uncomfortable in her attempts to sleep.

"Stop it!" she hissed at her littermates. The apprentice kept her paws over her ears in an attempt to muffle the scuffling sounds of the play-fight. The sounds faded off and she knew they must have taken their shenanigans outside of the den—until another, sharper prod jolted her. "I said quit it!" she hissed through her teeth as she squirmed in her nest. Spottedpaw braced herself for another prod, and when none came she relaxed in her nest once more.

Just when she had gotten comfortable, a paw jabbed her ribs harshly once more. Furious, Spottedpaw shot upright and whipped around. "I told you to cut it o–"

There was nobody there.

"Dustpaw?" Spottedpaw looked around the den cautiously—there wasn't a single trace of her littermates. "Riverpaw? Come on, this isn't funny anymore."

Silence.

With one last glance around, Spottedpaw crept out of the apprentices' den. The main cave was no different than the previous, smaller cave. Spottedpaw parted her jaws to pick up a scent—even just a trace was enough, but there was nothing. There was, however, a familiar sensation, and she rocked back on her haunches curiously as she recognized the fuzzy dream-feeling that was ever so

faint. *So that's what's going on here,* she mused in her own head.

"It took you long enough to figure it out."

The speckled molly spun around in shock. A dark-furred tomcat was emerging from behind the Smoothstone; a cat who was barely a shadow when he moved. She squinted at him suspiciously, earning an amused blink in return.

"She's awfully small, Shadestar. Are you sure this is the one?" Another cat peered down from the top of the Smoothstone. The newcomer hopped down next to the tom—Shadestar—and whispered something to him. As Spottedpaw looked closer, she noticed something odd about these already strange cats. They both had faint stars dappling their pelts that, to Spottedpaw, resembled morning dew.

Shadestar silenced the nameless cat with a gentle flick of his tail. He leaned towards Spottedpaw and flicked his ears in an invitation for her to copy his movement. "You don't know who we are, do you?" When he got only a blank gaze in return, he pricked his ears. "And yet I'm able to visit you now, after all my previous attempts failed. That is truly peculiar. You must have been assigned a wonderful mentor."

"Who are you, though? And why would I dream about you? I don't even recognize you . . . ." Spottedpaw was still somewhat suspicious of the two strange cats. She faintly recalled tales from the elders of starry-furred cats, but every other cat in the Gorge said those were merely myths and legends. "Are you . . . are you StarClan cats?" she whispered, tilting her head slightly.

"Things must have changed so much since I've been gone." Shadestar was so soft-spoken that Spottedpaw wondered if he'd meant for her to hear it. His eyes darkened briefly with what looked like grief—or perhaps longing, but that didn't last very long. "Truthfully, I'm surprised you've been catching on as fast as you have," he mewed at her, acting as though the previous moment of despair hadn't happened. "You are correct. Though we're more than just some random StarClan cats, at least when it comes to you and the Gorge, but that must be for another time. We haven't much time

left."

"What do you mean? Why am *I* dreaming of you *now?* Aside from you being some StarClan cats, I don't even know who you are."

"You'll find out soon enough, young one. Be swift in your pursuit of serenity. You will earn your golden dawn, I am certain." Before Spottedpaw could speak again, the mysterious duo had vanished and she was waking up in her nest. *That is the last time I go to sleep without eating,* she thought grouchily as she shook moss out of her fur. *What nonsense.*

Chapter 4

". . . similar to the Clans, but we cannot say the old titles unless it is a mentor speaking to their apprentice. Make sure you remember that. When there is a deputy in the Clans, we have a regent. When there is a medicine cat, we have a healer. Any cat in the Gorge caught uttering the old words are to be punished by the active regent. Show no mercy, show no fear. Where there is mercy, there is weakness within your heart. If there's weakness in your heart, you are a liability to the Gorge. Absolutely do not . . ." Hawkscar droned on about the codes of the Gorge and Spottedpaw let her mind be carried away by the sounds of the forest around her. The morning sun was dappling the leaves around them and warmed her pelt; off in the distance she could see the shimmer of the rushing river that bordered the very edge of the Gorge territory. Songbirds chirped and sang in the trees around them. There was an occasional rustle in the branches as they flitted around the forestry with one another. *Lucky birds,* she thought to herself. *At least they don't have to sit and listen to the same lesson, over and over. I bet they don't get freaky dreams like I do, either.*

"Spottedpaw." Her mentor's stern tone ripped Spottedpaw from her thoughts. "Have you listened to a single word I've said today?" The tom gave a soft sigh when she only ducked her head. "What was the last thing I said?"

"Um . . . don't be merciful, and don't be fearful?" Spottedpaw lifted her head slowly and winced inwardly when she saw disappointment flash in his eyes.

"Wrong." Hawkscar fell quiet for a few moments, his gaze locked on his apprentice. He finally let out an exasperated sigh and spoke again. "You've been distracted for days, Spottedpaw. What's gotten into you?"

"N-Nothing!" she retorted hastily. It didn't take long for her to realize she had responded far too quickly, so she added, "You've just been giving me the same lesson for days now, Hawkscar. It's so

boring. I wanna hunt and be trained how to fight, just like the other apprentices." Spottedpaw pawed softly at the loose leaves by her paws. After what had happened with her siblings she was hesitant to tell anyone about the dream she'd had. Not only did she not want to end up in trouble again, but she knew they would laugh at her and say she'd been listening to the elders' tall tales too much. *It felt so real,* she mused. Though the dream gnawed at the back of her mind, it wasn't the only thing distracting her. Ever since she'd heard her siblings conspiring in their den she started noticing Dustpaw casting her sideways glances. He and Fernpaw were constantly whispering amongst each other, and it only stroked the flame that was her anxiety.

For the first time in days, her mentor's eyes softened. With another, quieter sigh this time, he spoke. "The lessons about the code we uphold here in the Gorge are just as critical to your survival as any hunting technique or battle strategy. If you—or anyone, for that matter—is caught breaking our set of codes, Deadeye would have your hide. You must get this code engraved into your mind or your own life would be at risk." Though he didn't say it, Spottedpaw knew his livelihood relied on it just as much as her own.

"It's not like he'd kill us though, right?" she whispered, though it took a few attempts to get the words out. The grim expression on Hawkscar's face told Spottedpaw everything she needed to know. She fixed her posture and mewed, "I promise I'll pay more attention to your lessons, Hawkscar." Happiness welled up inside her chest when she got an approving nod. She felt a newfound determination deep within herself. "I'll be the best warrior in the Gorge! And I'll especially be better than lousy Dustpaw." The elder tom burst into laughter at the added outburst.

"What's that all about?" Hawkscar purred in amusement, nearly choking on his laughter. "Are you having a sibling quarrel, Spottedpaw?"

"He's been nothing but rude to me since you scolded us," Spottedpaw admitted. "I don't know why he's so mean. He keeps giving me dirty looks, and Fernpaw too!"

Hawkscar looked thoughtful for a moment. "He's merely jealous," he concluded. "Just think about it. His mentor is a cat that most warriors are afraid to cross, I can't even imagine how hard he's got it. And you know, Spottedpaw, it's no secret that I've treated you more kindly than the other mentors and their apprentices." He paused again and drew a paw over his whiskers. "It's only natural for him to be jealous. He'll forget all about it with time."

"If you say so," Spottedpaw murmured hesitantly.

"Are you finally ready to pay attention to the lesson? You missed some important parts of the code when you started daydreaming, you know." Hawkscar nudged her playfully.

"Yes, Hawkscar," the molly squeaked in surprise.

"Where was I last? Oh yes. Never show mercy to your enemies, and never show your fear. As much as I hate to say it, not everyone in the Gorge is willing to turn a blind eye—I'm sure you know just as well as I do, Spottedpaw. If we're in a battle, it is important to remember this. If any cat sees you falter and Deadeye hears about it, you will no doubt face repercussions. To be loyal to the Gorge is to be loyal to Deadeye above all else; that includes your kin and friends. Are you following?"

Spottedpaw nodded quickly. "It makes sense, kind of," she mumbled. "My parents have never really been close with me or any of my littermates. It feels the same way with almost every cat, too."

"That's correct. Most of us don't form close bonds with one another so that we can stay loyal to Deadeye with more ease," the cream tom nodded in approval. "There is one final part of the code that Deadeye requires us to follow. This is the *most* important part of the code, so make sure you're paying close attention." He waited and made sure his apprentice was at attention and carried on, though Spottedpaw thought he seemed pained by the words he spoke. "I understand that the elders tell you apprentices about what you know as StarClan. As far as any of you are concerned, those are tall tales. That was what Deadeye calls the old Clan faith, and any cat rumored to be holding onto the old faith will be permanently relieved of duties under Deadeye's command."

"Everyone acts like that StarClan talk is a joke," Spottedpaw commented softly. "Is it so serious?"

"Yes." Her mentor's sharp tone startled her. Hawkscar cleared his throat awkwardly and continued at a normal tone. "That is the most important rule of the code. You must *never* let any cat here think otherwise, Spottedpaw. Is that understood?" The she-cat gave a hurried nod, to which her mentor swayed his tail in response. "Good. That'll conclude our lessons for the day. I'm sure you'll be happy to know that you'll be accompanying me on a border patrol when we return to the caves." Spottedpaw perked up when he told her the news and bounced ahead of him as they traveled back to their home.

When they arrived at the camp it was slightly busier than usual. The warm sun had reminded her that greenleaf was nearing its end and she realized her campmates would be preparing for the rough seasons ahead. Hawkscar instructed her to eat before their patrol while he gathered those who would be accompanying them, and so she did. The scent of her brother washed over her as she ate her thrush; curiously, she looked up from her meal at Dustpaw. The mouse-furred tom was padding up to her slowly, his eyes glinting in the dark caverns.

"How were your lessons?" he teased, disgust hinting at his voice. "I bet you were too busy hearing lessons for new apprentices that you didn't get any *real* training in."

"Hawkscar said those lessons are just as important as any hunting or battle training we get!" Spottedpaw retorted as she bristled in defiance.

"Hawkscar says," Dustpaw mocked. "You really believe everything he tells you, just like a mouse-brain. He just said that so you wouldn't feel bad about not getting true warrior training in."

"That's not true—"

"Cut it out already, Dustpaw," Riverpaw approached them, glowering at their brother. "You're the one who was distracting her from hunting, anyways. It could have waited until after but you

were too impatient."

"It wouldn't have mattered if her mentor wasn't so keen on training her more than the rest of us," Dustpaw scowled, but padded away with his tail lashing behind him.

"You should ignore him when he does that, you know," Riverpaw turned to Spottedpaw now, his vibrant green eyes glittering with concern. "He knows he's not being fair to you."

"I know. It doesn't matter," Spottedpaw shrugged and nibbled on the rest of her food. She looked up from her morsel and spotted Hawkscar waiting for her at the entrance to the camp alongside Redflight and Snowface. "I've got to go. Thank you, Riverpaw." She gulped down what remained of her meal and rushed to the group awaiting her. The two accompanying warriors nodded to her as she approached, and Hawkscar stood to his paws. He gave a curt nod and led the three out of camp and into the forest. They travelled at a swift pace, the foliage whipping at their fur as their paws drummed against the earth beneath them. The thick scent of BlazeClan flooded Spottedpaw's senses as they drew nearer to the border—thicker than she'd remember it. She realized a BlazeClan patrol must have passed by quite recently.

The group slowed as they arrived at the edge of their territory. Redflight padded off to freshen the marks of the borders without a word, leaving Spottedpaw to walk with Snowface and her mentor. Hawkscar stuck close to the apprentice with his ears perked- Snowface was just as attentive, and Spottedpaw guessed they had both noticed the fresher-than-usual scent at the borders. Spottedpaw watched the forest around her intently as they checked the borders; her eyes stayed peeled for any sign of an enemy patrol. An angered hiss took all three of them by surprise and before long they realized it had come from the direction in which Redflight had disappeared. The three cats hared towards the noise until the undergrowth gave way to reveal the tortoiseshell tom-and five newcomers. The scent of BlazeClan was stronger than ever and Spottedpaw realized this must have been the patrol she'd picked up.

"What's going on here?" Snowface demanded, bounding forward to stand by the distressed Redflight.

"They were about to cross the border," Redflight snarled while lashing his tail. His fur was so bristled that he looked almost twice his size.

"That's a load of mouse-dung!" a ginger-and-white molly retorted. "We were marking our borders just like you were!" Spottedpaw looked over the rest of the BlazeClan cats slowly—she noticed two smaller cats, likely to be apprentices just like her. She instantly recognized Swallowclaw and Jayleaf, both of whom looked uncertain about the current situation. The apprentice was about to call a greeting when Hawkscar cleared his throat next to her. She looked over and saw him give the tiniest shake of his head.

"Marking borders, my tail!" Redflight snapped. "You were way too close!"

"How else do you propose we mark our borders, then?" It was Swallowclaw who spoke up this time. He took a few slow pawsteps forward, confidence radiating off of his stance. "Is that not how borders work?"

"You can mark the borders without being close enough for suspicion," Snowface growled. Spottedpaw noticed that he was flexing his claws eagerly against the earth underneath them and felt a knot form in her belly. She glanced at her mentor and saw that his expression was dark, only confirming her fears about where the exchange was heading.

"If that is truly how you feel," Swallowclaw spoke coolly, "then why is your Clanmate on the very edge of the territory as well? Or does that only apply to the other Clans?" Redflight let out a low growl in response and took a pawstep forward. Spottedpaw tried to shrink away but Hawkscar nudged her forward forcefully. Without a word spoken between them, she understood. *Show no fear,* she recited in her mind. With shaky paws she stepped forward a tail-length, trying to appear calm and collected. She let her gaze travel over the BlazeClan cats and noticed that the apprentices looked just as afraid as she felt. As her gaze traveled she locked eyes with Jayleaf and instantly felt her pelt heat up in embarrassment. Spottedpaw tore her gaze away and watched Swallowclaw closely, hoping that he might talk sense into her campmates.

"It won't be your territory for much longer," Snowface commented just as coolly, though Spottedpaw could see the anger in his eyes. "You should know, Swallowclaw, that Deadeye has been very interested in this strip of land." The five BlazeClan cats bristled defensively in response and swapped worried gazes amongst each other.

"There's no reason for him to be interested in our land. He knows just how dry and barren it is."

"Oh, that's not what he cares about." The words were left hanging in the air-the unspoken threat within them chilled Spottedpaw to the bone. *Deadeye wouldn't really fight for wastelands, would he?* Even though she knew the answer, Spottedpaw desperately hoped it wasn't true. She started feeling hot and sickened as the thoughts flew around her head. Right as it seemed like things between the groups were about to escalate even further, she felt Hawkscar step forward beside her.

"I think that's quite enough, Snowface," he cautioned. "Deadeye might throw a fit if he found out that you're out here spewing this nonsense. You know better than I that nothing has even been decided on yet." Snowface gave the younger tom a scowl and backed away from the border.

"Fine. Come on, Redflight. We can send another patrol later to make sure these BlazeClan scum won't cross the border after we've left." As they started padding away Spottedpaw a gaze burning into her pelt-she saw with a glance behind her that Jayleaf was watching them vanish into the forest. Though it came as no surprise to her, his expression was unreadable. A flick to her ear reeled her attention back to the group in front of her and she realized that they had been speaking heatedly to one another.

"It might do you well to hold your tongue next time, Hawkscar," Snowface growled lowly. "You've a lot of nerve speaking on behalf of Deadeye when you can't even seem to train your apprentice correctly; I saw how she was trembling. It was entirely dishonorable to the Gorge and to Deadeye."

"Hiding your fear is not all there is to being a warrior, Snowface.

What good is she if that's all she can do? Battle skills hold priority." A heavy silence fell upon the group as they trekked onward to the camp. Spottedpaw felt more and more self-conscious as they padded on—did she fail Hawkscar by showing how afraid she had been? Her worries welled up in her chest until she felt like she would explode.

Spottedpaw immediately searched for Riverpaw when they returned to the cave. When she spotted her brother, she trudged towards him and flopped onto the cold floor beside him. Nothing was said between them; the mere presence of one another was enough to say how they felt. She watched her mentor join a group of warriors and begin to chatter thoughtfully to them. Snowface skulked towards Deadeye's den and Spottedpaw felt her dread from before resurface stronger than ever. Deep down she knew he was reporting what had happened on the patrol-down to the very last detail of it all. Even with the busyness of her campmates around her, she felt chilled straight to the bone.

"Spottedpaw." Before she even had time to worry, Deadeye had emerged from his den with Snowface and was calling to her from across the cave. The one-eyed tom looked just as serious and stern as ever. "Come." The chatter had immediately died down. Upon looking around, Spottedpaw saw that Hawkscar was looking over to her worriedly. She gulped and rose to her paws, making her way to their leader slowly. She felt heavier than ever, her paws like solid stone. As she drew closer she spotted the nursery and noticed several kits peeking out, and after a moment she realized they were Deadeye's kits. They had wonder in their eyes as they watched her draw closer to their father and Spottedpaw felt a twinge in her heart. *Will their admiration fade away just like every other cat here?* Deadeye whisked around and entered his den when Spottedpaw drew nearer. After a brief hesitation she followed the dark tom inside.

Though it hadn't been long since she was in this den with Hawkscar requesting permission to attend the Gathering, she had forgotten just how eerie the den felt inside. The lack of bedding suggested that Deadeye simply rested on the cold floor of the den, where there were old prey bones strewn about.

"Do you know why I wish to speak with you?" Spottedpaw jumped at the question. The tom wasn't facing her, but his twitching tail-tip gave away his displeasure. When she didn't respond he cleared his throat. "Snowface told me what happened on the border patrol you were apart of. Tell me, Spottedpaw, do you know the code we follow in the Gorge?"

"Y-Yes, Deadeye," she squeaked.

"Then why is it I hear you were trembling in the presence of not only another Clan, but your mentor and one of my best warriors? Do I not require all of my warriors and apprentices to show no fear? I know that I don't need to remind you that your father is my best warrior next to Clawtail. He once fought an entire patrol on his own —it would be a shame if any of his kin were to embarrass him like you have today." Spottedpaw flinched at the mention of Greyheart. Never in her life did she think she would be compared to the scar-covered tom that was her father.

"It won't happen again," she whispered meekly. "I promise."

"Oh, I know it won't," Deadeye purred as he turned to face the young she-cat. He padded up to her, his single eye glinting menacingly in the darkness. Spottedpaw bowed her head to him, not wanting to meet his gaze. She gasped when Deadeye raised a paw and pushed her onto the stony floor—his paw pressed heavily against her throat, cutting off her airflow as his claws pricked her skin. The apprentice started to flail as she struggled for air, but the leader kept her down with his other paw and leaned towards her. "If I ever hear of this behavior again, there will be dire consequences," he threatened. "Do we have an understanding?" Spottedpaw desperately tried to nod, wincing as the movement caused the claws against her neck to pierce the flesh. Deadeye finally backed off and she gasped desperately to fill her lungs with air again. He seemed to notice the blood that was beginning to trickle from her throat and clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Go see Frozenleaf for that. Before you even think of talking to anyone about this, remember: you're merely an apprentice. Nobody will care." Spottedpaw gave a weak nod and hurriedly retreated from the den.

"Spottedpaw!" Hawkscar called for her as soon as she exited the den. She ignored her mentor and rushed towards the medicine den for treatment. *Nobody will care.* The words resonated in her head and she fought back the feelings of distress that were building up inside her once again. Movement at the apprentices' den briefly caught her eye—Dustpaw had poked his head out curiously and she caught his eye for only a moment. The complete shock in his gaze took Spottedpaw by surprise, though it didn't last long. It was replaced by his usual glare as she reached the medicine den and entered it.

Nobody will care. Not even my littermates.

Chapter 5

[image]

Ice-cold rain pelted against Spottedpaw's fur, each droplet sending a sensation of shock straight to her bones. The trees around her swayed with the lashing wind; the river in the gorge below her thrashed wildly from shore to distant shore. Overwhelmed by the turbulent weather, Spottedpaw retreated from the edge of the gorge, squeezing into the cave entrance behind her. Agitated voices carried through the cave systems and she hastened her pace as she tried to discern the conversation. She halted only when she could see into the main cave, unsure of whether or not she should reveal herself to the bickering cats ahead of her. Spottedpaw peeked her head out of the tunnel slightly and blinked quickly to adjust her eyes to the darkness. The molly had to hold back a gasp as she saw who sat arguing ahead of her.

"I have tried warning you," a familiar smoky tom growled, though there was a hint of distress in his voice. What was Shadestar doing here? She had thought he was merely a figment of her imagination. With a closer look at the two quarreling cats, she noticed that the other cat looked just like Shadestar—albeit slightly smaller and much darker in the dim light of the cave. "The path you're forging is reckless and you're endangering the lives of every cat around you."

"This is the best path for the Clans," the other tom snarled sharply. "You wouldn't understand. You'd grown too soft in your moons of leadership." Shadestar narrowed his eyes and padded closer towards the other cat—so much so that their noses nearly touched. "Watch yourself, you old fleabag. The cats at the gorge are no longer yours to command and they readily shared my feelings about how things should be run here. Keep in mind," the tom narrowed his eyes and sat down, "that you being in StarClan doesn't grant you protection. I know that you can die permanently as a *resident among the stars."* His tone dripped with venomous sarcasm while Spottedpaw noticed a flash of fear in Shadestar's eyes. Behind

the two toms, the faintest flash of blue caught her attention—as though what little light entered the caves were reflecting off of some cat's eyes. Even more unnerving was the feeling that this hidden cat was looking straight at Spottedpaw while the other cats hadn't seemed to notice her presence in the tunnel. She felt chilled to her bone when she caught the icy gaze.

Another growl ripped her attention back to the argument. Spottedpaw tensed and, right as she was about to intervene, the floor of the cave fell out from under her paws. *What is this?* Her mind was reeling as she spun through empty darkness. This was no cave-in or landslide. Her vision was pitch black, but she heard the echoes of the arguing cats growing fainter and fainter. Right when her stomach started flipping from her seemingly endless spinning she was granted vision once again with a harsh thud against a cold forested floor. Though the relentless rain from earlier had stopped, the ground beneath her paws was soaked and the leaves littering the forest floor were soggy and cold. Spottedpaw struggled to her paws and lurched forward as her vision swayed back and forth, waves of nausea crashing into her at full force. Even as her vision cleared and her nausea receded, heavy confusion still clouded her mind. She grew even more confused yet when she saw that all around her were snarling and growling cats lined up with their teeth bared and claws at the ready. Ahead of her was the strange tom from the cave. His dark amber eyes were narrowed at something behind her and when she turned around she saw four others holding their heads with dignity.

"Stop while you've got the chance, Crowstar," a thick-furred white molly growled softly. "Your actions here will change the entire dynamic of the Clans. Cats will *die*—StarClan will never forgive you. Is that what you want?"

"Those who die today are worthy sacrifices to the future we need in this forest," the tom, Crowstar, retorted. "You've all grown soft with your ways. And StarClan!" The dark leader gave a snort of mockery. "To the Dark Forest with them. They're a bunch of dead cats, Ivorystar—what good would listening to them do?" There was a collective gasp from the cats surrounding them, and Spottedpaw began growing claustrophobic as a few began to close in on the

dark leader.

"How dare he?" some cat behind her whispered. She turned around and recognized Fishstar from the Gathering she had attended—no, he looked much younger now. Rooted at his side was a pale tabby tom who merely nodded in agreement, his eyes wide with disbelief. Then, in a moment of rage, Fishstar yowled, "Shadestar would have never led the Clans to this! What do the cats of MistClan think of this?" Spottedpaw realized that it seemed to have struck a nerve as Crowstar's face became twisted in a furious snarl.

"You'll never mention that name in my presence, mouse-heart," Crowstar yowled and launched himself towards the tabby tom.

"No!" The white molly from before dove forward, taking the blow for the tom. She reeled backwards when the dark leader's claws raked across her throat and stumbled when blood began oozing out at a dangerous pace. "You," she let out an agonized cough, "will not harm my warriors. You are—" another cough, and blood spattered along the ground, "—a fox-hearted excuse of a Clan leader. You don't deserve your name or your nine lives." Ivorystar crumpled to the leaf-strewn floor and remained motionless. A grief-stricken cry from Fishstar and her unending stiffness revealed that she had been on her final life. Within an instant the forest around Spottedpaw was filled with screeching cats, battling with all of the might in them. The apprentice grew panicked and tried to back away from the commotion and bloodshed.

"Spottedpaw!" She looked around wildly, searching for the source of the call. *Oh, how do I get out of here?* she thought desperately. A paw jabbed into her side and she shrank further away from the warring throngs of cats. "Spottedpaw, come on!" Another jab to her flank—she blinked and, with a sharp gasp, jolted awake in her nest. Above her, the deep green eyes of her brother peered down at her. "What in the world is wrong with you? It's nearly sunhigh and you've been thrashing in your sleep!" With an embarrassed glance around, Spottedpaw realized moss from her nest had been strewn about the den. That was the third time in less than a dozen sunrises that she'd had a dream like that.

"Sorry, Riverpaw," she mumbled sheepishly. "I was just having a bad dream, I suppose. Hawkscar isn't mad at me for waking up so late, is he?" *Or worse, Deadeye?* The brown tabby's eyes glistened with concern, though Spottedpaw hardly noticed; her mind was stuck on all the strange cats she had dreamt about. She had heard of Crowstar through the elders' tales occasionally, but he wasn't spoken of very often and when he was they were always praising him. Why would someone so highly praised act the way that she had dreamt of?

"No, he's not upset with you—but you better hurry and get up. I overheard Fireclaw and Coldstep talking about another apprentice ceremony for Ironheart's kits!" Spottedpaw scrambled to her paws and shook her fur out at the mention of an apprentice ceremony. Ironheart's litter had been a few moons younger than Spottedpaw and her siblings, but because of how early they'd been made apprentices there was a large gap in their apprenticeship ceremonies. She was excited at the thought of finally getting some company in the den and some help with their daily apprentice chores. Riverpaw hesitated as if he wanted to say something more, but gave a shake of his head and retreated from the den without another word. Spottedpaw gave her fur a quick cleaning and cleaned up the mess that her nest had turned into. After it was tidied up, she exited the apprentices' den and almost immediately bumped into her mentor and Rocksplash.

"Spottedpaw," her mentor greeted as she dipped her head apologetically. "I was just about to wake you." Hawkscar turned to the tortoiseshell warrior next to him and gave a curt nod. "I liked your training ideas, Rocksplash. I'll try and implement them with Spottedpaw and see how well it goes—do the same with Dustpaw and let me know your results." The she-cat gave mumbled something approving and padded off to speak with Clawtail, Deadeye's regent. The cream-furred warrior turned back to his apprentice, his eyes now bright with worry. "Are you okay, Spottedpaw? Riverpaw told me you've been having bad dreams—did it have something to do with anything Deadeye said to you?" Spottedpaw quickly felt a sense of discomfort bubble up within her.

"I've *told* you," she muttered crossly, "nothing happened in

Deadeye's den. He was just asking how our border patrol went. I guess he was just worried over the fight we had with those BlazeClan cats."

"Spottedpaw–"

"Seriously, Hawkscar, I'm *fine."* Spottedpaw fought to keep agitation from her tone—the only thing she wanted was to be able to talk to her mentor about what happened, to be comforted by him. *If you keep asking me, I won't be able to keep it a secret,* she thought to herself desperately, though she suspected her mentor knew that much. She hated lying to him about anything and she was certain she was doing a bad job of it.

"Spottedpaw," her mentor ignored her protests, "you've been restless for days now. I've seen you fidgeting like a newborn kit, glancing over your shoulder all the time—you're not exactly good at hiding when something is wrong, you know. And now I hear about you having bad dreams—dreams bad enough that you've been thrashing about in your sleep. Riverpaw was about to fetch me to help wake you, you know. It's clear that something has been bothering you." Spottedpaw fell silent as she racked her brain for a viable excuse for her behavior. The cream tom sighed at her silence and lowered his voice.

"Look, if you don't want to talk about it, that's always okay. I just want you to know it's safe for you to talk to me, alright?" With a slight hesitation, he added, "We'll just have to be more careful in the future." She wished with all of her heart that Hawkscar was telling her the truth, but she could no longer be certain about who to trust. Vaguely, she recalled Frozenleaf's uncomfortable interrogation after she had gone to the healer for treatment. The snowy she-cat had spoken the same words to the apprentice, though even then Spottedpaw refused to say a word about what had happened.

"Let all cats strong enough to eliminate their own prey gather before me!" Deadeye was perched atop the Smoothstone, his tail-tip twitching impatiently as cats slowly milled into the clearing. She realized Riverpaw must have been right about the apprentice ceremony—she spotted Ironheart sitting at the edge of the crowd

with her litter of kits. "Today, Ironheart's kits have reached their age of apprenticeship. Step forward to receive your apprentice names and your mentors." The four kits stepped forward—the two toms, Rabbitkit and Brownkit were very clearly anxious. Brownkit was shaking in his fur and Rabbitkit was flicking his tail tip nervously. The pale tabby she-kit, however, strutted forward confidently—she had the same ambitious expression that Spottedpaw's siblings had all held during their ceremonies. The fourth kit, a speckled grey molly named Nightkit, was like none of her siblings. She stayed calm and collected as she padded forward. Her eyes glittered with excitement, though it was nothing like Pearlkit's ambitious gaze.

The cats crowding the Smoothstone murmured excitedly amongst themselves, and Spottedpaw realized nobody knew who the mentors would be. She let her gaze travel to Deadeye for a hint at who it could be, but he revealed nothing with his expressions. *Some leader he is,* she grimaced internally.

"Rabbitkit, step forward!" the svelte leader called, his voice echoing off the cave walls. The dark ginger tom padded forward hesitantly, staring at Deadeye in awe. "From this day on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Rabbitpaw. Foxleap, come forward." Spottedpaw perked her ears as her mother stepped towards their leader; at the back of the gathered cats, she spotted Fernpaw and Dustpaw watching just as intently. "You're ready for another apprentice now that you've settled back into the warriors' den. Guide this young tom along the path of the Gorge warriors." He waited as the two touched noses before carrying on. "Pearlkit," he called, and the pale she-cat stalked forward with the same confidence from before. "From this day forward until you earn your warrior name, your name will be Pearlpaw. Snowface, I trust that you will train her well." The two greeted each other and Spottedpaw blinked as a whisper from beside her startled her.

"He's a good choice." It was Riverpaw, watching with a hint of jealousy. "Fireclaw is a great mentor and all, but Snowface makes it clear that he's devoted to the Gorge no matter the cost." Spottedpaw wanted to voice her disagreement, but Deadeye's call cut her off.

"Nightkit, step forward." The speckled grey molly padded

forward. Her previously calm composure was almost entirely forgotten now as she bounced on her paws excitedly. "From this point until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Nightpaw. Mudwing, I believe you are prepared for your first apprentice. You've proven to me time and time again that you're an asset to us, and I only hope that your apprentice turns out the same." Deadeye stared down at the final kit with a thoughtful gaze. "Brownkit, come." The brown tabby stepped forward, still trembling nervously. A soft chuckle rippled through the crowded cats. "Now, I know that this may be unusual for a cat to receive an apprentice so soon, but I've heard plenty of praise from several warriors here. Thornheart—" the brown she-cat looked up, clearly startled by the call, "—you are more than ready for your first apprentice. I have faith that you will train Brownpaw all he needs to know to become a loyal warrior here." The gathered cats all murmured a collective approval as Thornheart gave herself a few embarrassed licks. Three tiny sets of eyes peered in awe from the nursery and Spottedpaw realized that Deadeye's kits had been watching the ceremony excitedly. Sitting next to the nursery Ironheart, her chest puffed out pridefully, though Spottedpaw realized she sat alone.

"Nobody knows who she took as a mate," Hawkscar murmured from beside her as though he had read her mind. "It was obviously some cat from outside the Gorge, but Deadeye doesn't particularly care as long as the kits remain here." The golden-furred apprentice nodded in understanding, though she kept watching curiously. "Hey, Mudwing," Hawkscar's call caught her attention. The black-and-white tom began to pad up curiously when Deadeye gave another call. The cats, who had begun to disperse, brought their attention back.

"I shouldn't have to remind you all," he started somewhat pretentiously, though there was a hint of teasing hidden in his tone, "but the Gathering is tomorrow night. Any cat who wishes to accompany me should remain gathered below me." Spottedpaw was about to retreat to the edge of the cave when Hawkscar nudged her forward encouragingly. She glanced back at her mentor and padded towards the Smoothstone hesitantly. Deadeye now sat below the boulder, naming off cats thoughtfully as they gathered around. "Anyone who received an apprentice today must focus on training

them as much as possible. You might be permitted to come along in a moon or two considering the progress you make. Redflight, you remain at camp as well . . . ." The one-eyed tom fell silent as he noticed Spottedpaw standing shyly at the back of the crowd. He watched her intently for a few seconds and she shuffled her paws uncomfortably under his searching gaze. *If he doesn't want me to go, he can just say it. He doesn't have to stare—* "Spottedpaw, you can come along with Hawkscar. Your littermates have earned their first Gathering as well, and their mentors may attend too, of course." Spottedpaw blinked in surprise and gave a nod before returning to her mentor. As she padded away from the group of cats, Frostheart shouldered past her rather aggressively with a grunt. Spottedpaw glanced at the cloudy tom over her shoulder and sat next to her mentor.

"What's his problem?" she mumbled softly. When she got no response from Hawkscar she glanced over at him; his thoughtful gaze was on Frostheart, but when he noticed Spottedpaw's stare he blinked at her in amusement.

"He's just a grumpy cat," he gave a purr of laughter. "Every cat knows that." The tom eased Spottedpaw's worries with a playful nudge. His warm amber eyes rested on something beyond Spottedpaw and she heard some cat clear their throat softly behind her. The golden apprentice peeked over her shoulder and saw the snowy white pelt of the healer, Frozenleaf. "Frozenleaf, it's nice to see you mingling," Hawkscar greeted her coolly. Spottedpaw kept a curious eye on her mentor; she knew it was odd for Frozenleaf to be making rounds of the cave.

"Relax, Hawkscar," the dainty she-cat dipped her head and watched the cream tom, a glint in her blue eyes. "I'm only making sure those of you attending the Gathering preserve your energy correctly this time. Last moon, Redflight nearly fell asleep on his paws when we hadn't even arrived yet! And since you volunteered so *readily*, I've been considering some new herb bundles for Gatherings to ensure you all are rested—I just need some cat to test it out." Hawkscar wrinkled his face in disgust when Frozenleaf pushed a leaf-wrapped sack towards him.

"There's no way in the world you could get me to test out your

vile concoctions, Frozenleaf," he muttered. There was, however, a new lightheartedness to his tone as he dropped it to a whisper. "I bet if you told Rocksplash it was important for the Gorge, she'd jump at the opportunity to try it for you." Though Frozenleaf said nothing at first, her eyes glittered with amusement at the idea.

"Alright, you're safe for now, Hawkscar," she teased with a twitch of her whiskers as she pushed the bundle to the side. "Don't think for a minute that it means you're excused from my questioning, though. Get comfortable. Spottedpaw, don't go far, because you're next." Hawkscar gave an exasperated sigh but made himself as comfortable as one could be on the stone-cold cave floor. Spottedpaw followed suit and let the droning of Frozenleaf's interrogation lull her mind into a daydream. Her mind wandered to her repetitive, haunting dreams; there was something different about her most recent dream, however. Those blue eyes that had only existed for a split second—while no other cat had acted as though they were able to see her, those icy eyes had pierced Spottedpaw straight to her core. There was no mistaking it, she knew. Whoever those eyes belonged to had been looking directly at her.

Spottedpaw stared off into space as her mind drifted off, the dream plaguing her thoughts. She hadn't heard tales of StarClan from the elders in moons, and she couldn't find a good excuse as to why she'd start having silly dreams about them all of a sudden—especially with cats she had never heard of before. *My imagination must simply be too wild,* she mused. Her mentor speaking her name brought her mind back to the present; when she focused back on the world around her, she realized that she had been staring at Nightpaw without even realizing it. The grey-speckled moll6 was staring back at Spottedpaw with confusion in her eyes and Spottedpaw quickly looked away, her fur heating up in embarrassment. *Oh no,* she worried to herself, *she's going to think there's something wrong with me.*

"Spottedpaw has had trouble sleeping recently." Her mentor's voice fully caught her attention this time. "You might want to give her something to help her get rest for the Gathering." Frozenleaf's curious gaze became fixated on the young apprentice while

Hawkscar gave a soft snort of amusement. "Don't even think about subjecting my apprentice to your weird concoctions, Frozenleaf. I've got to go talk to Rocksplash and Mudwing about a new training technique we want to test out—I'll take that bundle for you and save you a trip." The healer merely flicked her ear in a silent *'thank you',* her gaze not once straying from Spottedpaw.

"Trouble sleeping, eh?" she murmured as Hawkscar walked away. "What's been troubling you, Spottedpaw?" The golden she-cat quickly grew self-conscious under Frozenleaf's gaze. After a moment of silence, Frozenleaf continued in a lowered tone. "If it was what happened with Deadeye, you should know you have nothing to worry about. He knows he acted far too aggressively to such a little mistake—you're still learning." Though Spottedpaw insisted that nothing had happened with their leader, Frozenleaf carried on as if she knew exactly what had happened.

"No," she mewed defensively. "I've just been having silly dreams, that's all. I must have listened to the elders' stories and the nursery tales too much when I was younger." The snowy cat's ears perked slightly at Spottedpaw's response; a movement so slight that the warrior-to-be thought she might have imagined it.

"Silly dreams?" Frozenleaf queried. "If they've been interrupting your rest, they're not silly. What's been happening in these dreams of yours?" Spottedpaw shuffled her paws a bit, unsure of how to answer. If she explained that her mind had been exaggerating nursery tales, the healer would surely laugh—or worse, she could tell Deadeye that it involved nonsense about StarClan. Frozenleaf noticed the hesitation and leaned forward a whisker-length, "You know you can trust me, Spottedpaw. I'm here to help with things like this."

"There's always a lot of cats fighting," Spottedpaw admitted at last, though she didn't want to name any of the characters present in her dreams. Even if it was the result of silly nursery tales, she wasn't sure if Frozenleaf would take it the wrong way. "That's it, really . . . they just don't stop fighting. Cats around me ended up dying . . . ." A shudder shook her body as she recalled the vicious scene.

"Did they say anything to one another? Perhaps there was a mention of StarClan?" Frozenleaf's icy, searching gaze pierced Spottedpaw to the bone. *Something about her seems familiar,* the molly wondered to herself. The golden apprentice grew even more uncomfortable yet under her intense gaze. "I know that cats dying in your dreams can be very stressful, even if you think it's a silly thing to be shaken up over," the healer continued when Spottedpaw said nothing. "Come to me tomorrow after sunrise, I'll give you a poppyseed to help you sleep during the afternoon. If you remember anything important from these dreams of yours, make sure to come straight to see me, alright? We could find the source and help stop them." Spottedpaw watched as the elegant white she-cat padded off to others to prepare them for the Gathering. The healer's interest in her dream left her feeling rather unsettled—they were just stupid dreams from the nursery tales.

Chapter 6

"Hey, Spottedpaw, it's time for the Gathering! Come on!" Spottedpaw woke from a heavy, dreamless slumber to her new denmate, Nightpaw, nudging her repeatedly. The grey molly shuffled her paws excitedly and stared with her eyes full of wonder; the newly-made apprentice faced nearly everything with a similar expression. "Hurry up and get out there, sleepy-tail!" Spottedpaw struggled to her paws and shook her head groggily—she felt the effects of the poppyseed that Frozenleaf had given her still dragging at her consciousness. A yawn forced its way free and Spottedpaw gave a deep stretch. She nudged Nightpaw playfully and exited the den and, when she spotted cats beginning to gather for the journey, headed towards the entrance tunnel.

"Good morning," her mentor's teasing voice startled her. Upon turning to him, she saw that he sat a few tail lengths away from the mingling cats. "I almost thought you'd sleep through the Gathering." The cream tom paused for a second, his tail sweeping around a few stray leaves that had been tracked inside the cave. "Did you sleep alright?" he questioned after his moment of hesitation. "Were you bothered by more of your nightmares?"

"I actually slept very soundly," Spottedpaw murmured as she sat near her mentor. "I guess I'll have to thank Frozenleaf for her treatment." She was pleased to see her mentor look relieved, but dark thoughts nagged at the back of her mind, urging her to carry on, "But, um . . . Hawkscar—" The apprentice lost her voice almost as soon as she had begun to speak, unsure of what to say. Shame burned at her pelt; her mentor was always stressing over her.

"What is it, Spottedpaw?" The tom's warm amber eyes eased her worries. With a ruffle of her fur, she lowered both her gaze and her voice.

"Frozenleaf seemed *really* interested in what I was dreaming about. She was asking about StarClan and stuff. I didn't really get it but it made me feel kind of . . . well, uncomfortable." Spottedpaw

felt her pelt burn in embarrassment when she finally admitted how she felt and stared down at her paws. The silence she received from Hawkscar only worsened her embarrassment and she flicked her ears awkwardly—though she couldn't help peeking up at her mentor for some sort of reaction. When she did so, she saw that Hawkscar's expression was as unreadable as ever. *He's always so expressionless,* she thought to herself in dismay. *Sure, when we train it's a little different, but how am I supposed to know if I've said too much?* Worry started knotting at her belly, though she couldn't bring herself to break his gaze. Right when she thought she might explode, the tom spoke.

"I know I've said it plenty, but remember, Spottedpaw—you can always talk to me if something is troubling you, okay?" Though he stayed calm and collected, Spottedpaw could have sworn she saw a flash of concern in his eyes. The apprentice held his stare and tried to figure out what he could have been thinking. If he knew why Frozenleaf had behaved that way, he gave no hints. Right as the golden she-cat was about to say something more, Deadeye gave a yowl and began to lead the amassing cats out of the caves. *It's time for the Gathering,* she thought as she let herself be swept alongside her campmates. As they broke into the fresh air, Hawkscar padded a little ways ahead of her; just within earshot, she noticed, though too far for any practical conversation. It didn't take her long to realize she would have no time for conversation with her mentor during the journey to Tallrock—her siblings nearly knocked her off of her paws as they scrambled to catch up to her.

"Spottedpaw!" Fernpaw exclaimed, walking with such a bounce that even the tips of her ginger fur bounced. "Oh my, I can't believe we're finally going to a Gathering! Do you think this'll be just as awesome as your first Gathering, Spottedpaw? I bet something super-duper intense is gonna happen!" The molly could hardly keep up with her own words as she carried on. Spottedpaw kept her distance as she was not exactly eager to forget how she and Dustpaw treated her. She gave a gasp of fright as Riverpaw appeared at her other side, though he walked with much more dignity than their sister.

"Fernpaw, stop bouncing so much," the tabby attempted to scold.

He wasn't fooling anybody; Spottedpaw could easily see that he, too, was trembling with excitement. "You'll embarrass us and our mentors if you go to the Gathering acting like that!"

"Yeah, come on, Fernpaw!" Dustpaw chimed in, sliding in between the two sisters. "We'll be better than any apprentice there! Those Clans will *wish* they were more like us." For once, the only expression on his muzzle was one of pure excitement. It took all of Spottedpaw's willpower to withhold a snort of laughter at her siblings' behaviors. For a brief moment in time, she realized that maybe Hawkscar had been right. This near-speechless fight between Dustpaw and herself would surely blow over in time. As they trekked on towards the Gathering location, Spottedpaw awkwardly answered whatever questions they had about Gathering etiquette.

"Where do we sit?" Fernpaw questioned, her eyes wide. "With our mentors, perhaps?"

"Well, erm, I just sit with Hawkscar," Spottedpaw admitted, feeling her ears heat up in embarrassment. "There's a designated spot for all of the apprentices though. Hawkscar warned me that they might be kind of . . . well, curious, so I try to stay away." Her siblings didn't say anything for a moment, as if silently deciding whether or not to sit with strangers from the Clans.

"What good would sitting with them do?" Dustpaw muttered suspiciously. "I'm sure they'd just show us the same hostility we've seen at the borders!"

"That's not true, the Gathering is a time of peace!" Spottedpaw exclaimed incredulously. "They wouldn't dare break a truce. Besides, it might be good to talk to them—Dustpaw, I know you're good with your words," she gave her brother a meaningful nudge before continuing, "I'm sure talking to some other apprentices from the Clans would turn out good for us in the end." A brief flash in her brother's eyes told her he understood what she was hinting at.

"You know what? For once, Spottedpaw, you might be right about something." Though his voice once again carried a mildly malicious tone, his eyes shone with amusement as he teased his sister. With every pawstep and each word exchanged, Spottedpaw

felt as though a weight was being lifted off of her shoulders. She couldn't help a purr of delight at the new air between herself and her littermates. The purr was cut short by a wave of scents washing into her senses; a glance at her littermates told her that they had noticed it, as well. Spottedpaw's littermates gawked at the large barrier of foliage that lied straight ahead of them, and the molly held back a snicker. She knew that only a moon ago, she had been in their paws—she was certain that cats had found her reaction amusing, as well.

Deadeye gave a soft call ahead of them, and on their cue the cats around her streamed through the brushes and into the clearing ahead. Briefly she remembered what had happened on the BlazeClan border; she wanted to speak with Jayleaf again and, to Spottedpaw's relief, that meant sitting with her mentor. With a nod to her littermates she took up a quick pace as she tried to keep her mentor in her sight, but she found that it wasn't exactly an easy task. Her campmates shoved back and forth as they rushed through the barrier, grumbling at one another in annoyance as paws were stumbled onto. The apprentice gave a hiss under her breath and began weaving through the cats ahead of her in a desperate attempt to catch up to her mentor, trying to use her smaller size to her advantage. She broke through to the clearing and stopped in her tracks, her eyes bouncing from pelt to pelt as she searched for Hawkscar. Movement from his familiar creamy pelt caught her eye and she happily began to bound over to him.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Deadeye leaping atop the large boulder in the center of the clearing, the other leaders visibly inching away from him. Her campmates around her all noticed and seemed to find amusement in it as several murmurs and snickers rippled through their crowd. The she-cat flicked her ears when she caught up to her mentor; she knew the laughter was purely antagonistic towards the Clans, and her stomach turned when she thought of the motives underneath. It felt as though every cat in the Gorge secretly wished for the Clans to break the truce of the Gathering.

"Careful," a murmur in her ear gave Spottedpaw a start. When she saw that it was only Hawkscar, she relaxed. "I know that look in

your eyes; if you aren't careful, some cat would think you pity the Clans. That would be a terrible misunderstanding, now, wouldn't it?" Spottedpaw didn't utter a word in response, but she knew that her mentor didn't expect otherwise. All around her cats milled about—just like the previous Gathering, while cats from the Clans mingled with one another there was nearly a visible gap between the Gorge and the rest of them. The murmuring and chattering of all the cats slowly died down as Spottedpaw peered around at the other cats. She and Hawkscar had chosen a spot near the BlazeClan cats, though there was no sign of Jayleaf and Swallowclaw.

"Hawkscar," she muttered, her voice hardly more than a whisper. "Where are those BlazeClan cats?"

"Relax," her mentor coaxed, "they'll get here when they get here." Doubt clawed at her belly

"What if they're mad about—"

"Hey, Hawkscar. Sorry we're a little late." Swallowclaw's deep voice was as friendly as ever. The dark brown tabby nodded to them as he took a seat, his thick-furred tail curling at his paws. Jayleaf sat wordlessly next to his Clanmate, mimicking the nod to both Hawkscar and Spottedpaw. "We got a little bit caught up." The tom glanced up at the huddle of leaders, the two Gorge cats following his gaze to Heatherstar, the same leader who had challenged Deadeye during the last Gathering.

"Ah, yes," Hawkscar murmured. "How did she react to the, er . . . incident at the border?" The longer Spottedpaw watched the leaders, the more she noticed that the four huddling together looked much more distressed than she remembered.

"It looks like she didn't take it well," she murmured before Swallowclaw could answer. Spottedpaw quickly realized her mistake and bowed her head apologetically. "S-Sorry," she mumbled in embarrassment, to which the warrior gave a chuckle.

"It's quite alright. I'm sure all of this must be very confusing to you," the BlazeClan warrior chuckled sympathetically. "You are right, too. Heatherstar took it as a direct threat to us, you know."

Hawkscar visibly cringed. "She wouldn't be wrong about that. I'm sorry I couldn't stop it sooner; admittedly, I risked enough as it was." The cream tom lowered his voice and leaned towards Swallowclaw, whispering something that was inaudible to Spottedpaw. The brown warrior glanced at Spottedpaw for a brief second before averting his gaze.

"I understand the position you're in, don't worry, Hawkscar." Spottedpaw perked her ears curiously, but the two warriors ended the subject at that. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between the two that ran much deeper than Spottedpaw could come to fathom. She peered around them at Jayleaf and wondered if he shared this understanding. A single glance at him, however, and she realized that he was just as confused as she was. Spottedpaw wanted desperately to apologize for what had happened at the border between BlazeClan and the Gorge, but she knew that there were too many curious ears around. Instead, she let her gaze wander back up to the dark-furred she-cat.

"Is Heatherstar going to confront Deadeye?" she wondered under her breath. As soon as she had said it, her mentor tapped her shoulder with his tail.

"Enough of that. The announcements will be starting soon." The tom gave her a stern look and Spottedpaw looked away sheepishly. Jayleaf stepped forward as she did so, nudging her playfully.

"C'mon, Hawkscar. You know how apprentices get curious!" he teased the two of them with a nod to the apprentice. "Let her wonder a bit! Spottedpaw, do you think that's the kind of reaction that Deadeye is after? We all know that what Snowface said wasn't just a slip of the tongue." Spottedpaw flicked her tail thoughtfully; she remembered how at the previous Gathering, Deadeye had only seemed amused when the others lashed out at him.

"He could definitely be waiting for someone to accuse him," she finally answered, shuddering as she remembered her own confrontation from the leader. Spottedpaw knew that he was cunning and definitely dangerous, but why go so far as to bait the other Clans? "Why would he do that, though?"

"Obviously—"

"I said that's enough of that," Hawkscar hissed quietly. He made no movements other than a singular flick of his ear, as if trying to motion to the cats around them. He lowered his voice once again, so much so that Spottedpaw had to strain to hear him, even though they were sitting side by side. "Jayleaf, I understand that in the true Clans, it's good to teach apprentices this way; in the Gorge, letting apprentices *wonder* is what gets cats killed." Jayleaf gave a slow nod and sat back down, shooting Spottedpaw an apologetic look. Spottedpaw felt her ears heat up in embarrassment but it was quickly replaced with the feeling of some cat watching her. *Come on, already,* she thought in exasperation, *Again with the staring?* She glanced around to make sure that nobody had heard their conversation—though she was unsure if Hawkscar had even intended for her to hear, either.

When she saw that nobody had their eyes on them—at least, nobody in direct proximity, she slowly tried to scan the clearing of cats. She couldn't find a single cat looking in their direction, though she was admittedly having a hard time distinguishing between every cat's pelts blurring together. As her sight drew nearer to the centerpiece of the clearing she could have sworn she caught the gaze of some cat; upon snapping her attention back, all she saw was the cluster of medicine cats and their apprentices with a deliberate distance between themselves and the Gorge healers. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and watched the group closely for a few moments. It didn't take long for her to write off her suspicions; there was no reason for a medicine cat from some other Clan to be watching her. She shook her pelt and tried to rid her mind of the thought. *I'm just getting paranoid,* she thought as the leaders' perch caught her attention. They had begun to step forward for announcements and as cats noticed, the chatter died down.

The four Clan leaders hesitated while Deadeye watched them with an amused twitch of his whiskers. Spottedpaw shot a concerned glance at Hawkscar, who merely shook his head in response. She knew that asking her mentor anything would be mouse-brained considering how silent the clearing had fallen. The silence sat heavily on all of the cats, the leaders themselves

exchanged darkened expressions. Finally, one of them stepped forward—a brown molly that Spottedpaw recognized as Harestar.

"Last moon, I mentioned the Twolegs that have been showing up with their kits and their dog," she began, her head held high and her voice strong. "A few sunrises ago a patrol discovered the dog running loose in the forest. Kestrelwing and Sagewillow were hurt in the ordeal but they are recovering quickly." The tabby dipped her head briefly, and as Spottedpaw saw the surrounding Clan cats copy the movement, as did she. Next to her Hawkscar stiffened and nudged her with his elbow; if Spottedpaw hadn't known better she would have thought that he was merely shifting. She lifted her head back up and focused on the leaders' perch, noticing an empty spot among the deputies. The apprentice realized that it must have been Kestrelwing's spot and blinked curiously. As Harestar continued with her announcements, Spottedpaw couldn't help wondering what sort of injury would keep a deputy from the Gathering.

"Thank you for warning us about the dog, Harestar." Fishstar's voice brought Spottedpaw's focus back. "I'm very sorry to hear about Kestrelwing, and I hope that he and Sagewillow recover quickly." The two leaders nodded to one another before Fishstar began his own announcements. He was much more at ease than the previous Gathering, though he still seemed to be searching—what for, Spottedpaw could hardly begin to guess. "The marshes are already beginning to dry up, and we expect a solid surge of prey before leaf-bare arrives. We have two new warriors, as well: Dapplecloud and Fernwillow!" The cats in the clearing cheered for the new warriors—all except for the Gorge, Spottedpaw noticed. As she cheered she glanced back towards where the other apprentices sat and, to her relief, her littermates were cheering for the new warriors as well.

As the cheering died down and Fishstar stepped backwards, Kinkstar took a slow step forward. He cast a glance at Heatherstar before speaking. "Just like the marshes on the moor growing thick from a rather stormy greenleaf, the rivers in RushClan territory have risen. So far it has only provided us even more fish than before, but we should be watchful of any flooding." He paused as cats all around nodded in agreement. "Crowsky has finally delivered

her kits and now has three healthy kits. And, like SwiftClan, we have new warriors in RushClan. Congratulations to Coppermist, Squirrelwhisker, and Voleberry." Once again Spottedpaw joined in to cheer for the newly appointed warriors, ignoring the silence from her campmates around her. She knew that she wanted to be cheered for whenever she earned her warrior name—and she knew they felt the same. The crowd of cats quieted down as they realized which leaders had yet to give their announcements; Heatherstar and Deadeye. A chill in the air told Spottedpaw that a good majority of those present had heard about what had happened at the border.

"Word travels fast, doesn't it?" Hawkscar commented to Swallowclaw. The BlazeClan tom nodded slowly, his eyes fixated on his leader as she stepped forward.

"Greenleaf has been very kind to us all," she mewed loudly, her voice ringing around the clearing. "BlazeClan also has new warriors! Congratulations to Firthistle, Talonstrike, Bouncepool, and every other new addition to the Clans' ranks!" Spottedpaw jumped as the entire clearing broke into prideful yowling. The black-furred leader watched the crowd below her fiercely, her blue eyes intense with emotion. "It is no lie that greenleaf began with us weakened; we were all dangerously short of capable warriors, while others took advantage of our suffering—" Heatherstar paused deliberately, and Deadeye perked his ears curiously, "—the rest of us have been dedicated to regaining our strength. StarClan help the fools who mess with the Clans."

The crowds of Clan cats broke out into ear-splitting cheering. Spottedpaw didn't dare join in this time; that was a clear dig at Deadeye and the Gorge, and she couldn't afford to get into more trouble with him. As she watched the cheering crowds, she felt a strange tug at her heart. Spottedpaw frowned and returned her gaze to the leaders' boulder when Deadeye stepped forward. The one-eyed tom sat and wrapped his tail around his paws patiently, his single eye glittering in the moonlight.

"We're thriving better than ever in the Gorge," he purred once the cats quieted down. "As of yesterday, we have four new apprentices. Unfortunately they aren't here tonight—they wanted *so badly* to get a head start on their training that they specifically

asked if they could stay at the camp." Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and exchanged a look with Hawkscar—Ironheart's kits had said nothing of the sort. "You know, we have so many new warriors *and* new apprentices that I might just have to start expanding the territory. It's *so hard* finding the prey to feed all of these eager mouths." Deadeye lifted a paw nonchalantly, pretending to inspect his claws.

"I'd like to see you try," Heatherstar retorted. "One of your warriors threatened one of my patrols a few sunrises ago; did you think that I wouldn't hear about that little incident, Deadeye?" Even though the leader stayed eerily calm, Spottedpaw could see the fury in her deep blue eyes. She saw with a glance at the BlazeClan cats that they had begun glaring at the cats from the Gorge. Jayleaf looked rather uncomfortable, but Swallowclaw kept his gaze locked on the leaders and his expression, like Hawkscar, unreadable. Spottedpaw glanced back at her siblings once again and saw that a massive gap had formed between them and the other apprentices. She whipped her gaze back around to the five leaders, feeling anxiety begin to gnaw at her stomach.

Deadeye ignored the leader's challenge and swiped a paw over his ear casually. "Oh, I knew you would hear about it," he cooed teasingly. "I suspected you would need ample time to accommodate my requests." The other three leaders glanced among themselves incredulously as Heatherstar reeled her head backwards.

"You'll have to kill me before you take my land," the dark leader snarled in response. "I've had enough of this Gathering. BlazeClan, come on." Without another word she hopped off of the boulder and stormed out of the clearing, her warriors trailing behind her. Spottedpaw shot Jayleaf an embarrassed and apologetic glance as he followed his Clanmates. The remaining leaders glared at Deadeye in horror; Fishstar took a pawstep forward, his tail lashing.

"Do you even realize what you've done, Deadeye?" he demanded. "This would cause an all-out war!" There was a faint movement beside him and Spottedpaw glanced around, but nobody else seemed to notice it. She narrowed her eyes at the shadowy outline and realized it looked just like a cat. *Is that Shadestar? Am I really starting to see things?* The apprentice blinked a few times and to her

relief, the figure was gone. Movement atop the boulder called her attention once more; Deadeye had simply chuckled and descended from the boulder, leaving the other three leaders to watch him—every single one of them clearly furious with the one-eyed tom. Deadeye waved his tail and the Gorge cats began to file after him. Clawtail shouldered her way past every other cat until she was walking right by Deadeye's side.

Hawkscar nudged Spottedpaw gently and the two of them began padding after their campmates. Once more she felt some cat's gaze burning into her back. When Spottedpaw glanced over her shoulder she met the intense stare of a brown tabby that had been sitting with the medicine cats. She quickly whipped her head back around and bounded through the thicket of plants that created the clearing barrier. Despite what her gut was telling her, she convinced herself that it was merely a coincidence.

Up ahead, Deadeye leaned over and murmured something to Clawtail before falling back and letting other cats travel ahead of him. Spottedpaw flicked her ear and walked a bit closer to Hawkscar. When Deadeye fell back next to them, the mentor and apprentice exchanged apprehensive glances.

"The two of you seem awfully friendly with those BlazeClan warriors," he murmured softly as he padded alongside them. Panic immediately began welling up inside Spottedpaw; she had no idea what would happen if she crossed Deadeye again. A single glance at her mentor told her that his mind was on the same track as hers. "I know what you're trying to do. You think you're sneaky, but I know."

"Y-You do?" It took all of Spottedpaw's strength not to stop dead in her tracks. Hawkscar brushed against her ever so slightly in an attempt to keep her grounded as they traveled through the forest.

"Of course I do. You feel bad about the mistake you made, and you're trying to make up for it by gaining the trust of our enemies. I knew there was a bit of your father's loyalty passed down to you, you just needed a bit of encouragement." Deadeye's tone was unusually approving; for once, Spottedpaw felt as though he was being sincere. Spottedpaw opened her mouth to speak but her

mentor beat her to it.

"You caught us," he mewed sheepishly, shooting a pointed look at Spottedpaw. "She's been asking nonstop to be trained to be the best warrior you've got, Deadeye. I figured befriending them was a pretty solid move at a time like this." Spottedpaw shut her mouth and kept an eye on Deadeye.

"You couldn't be more right, Hawkscar," Deadeye chuckled before picking up speed again. "Keep it up, and she might be able to experience her first battle soon!"

As Deadeye reclaimed his spot at the lead, Spottedpaw couldn't help the feeling of dread that followed their conversation. Her first battle? He couldn't possibly intend to fight BlazeClan over *barren* territory. She glanced at Hawkscar and saw that his eyes held the same emotions that were welling up in her chest. This wasn't what she wanted—she couldn't fight another cat the way that Deadeye demands. Suddenly her nightmares were the least of her worries; Spottedpaw wanted to curl up in her nest and dream herself out of this hellish reality.

Chapter 7

The mornings following the Gathering carried a crisp breeze through the air. A brittle leaf drifting along the cave floor reminded Spottedpaw of the harsh seasons that were inbound. Even though it was technically still greenleaf, she knew that they would need to prepare for anything that got thrown at them. Their cave systems provided plenty of shelter from the harsh weather of leafbare, but it wouldn't protect them from the seasonal bouts of whitecough and greencough.

Spottedpaw looked away from the dancing leaf and back to the activity at hand. Mudwing was showing Nightpaw a few battle stances, both offensive and defensive, while she and Hawkscar watched them. Spottedpaw held back a snort of laughter as Nightpaw nearly toppled over; the grey apprentice was clearly not used to the moves and wobbled every time she tried it. Through her laughter, the golden-furred molly couldn't help but feel bad for Nightpaw—they were using the training cave to practice since the newly appointed apprentice was not yet ready to venture outside. Training in the caves meant that they were punished more harshly for mistakes; every time the she-cat slipped, a harsh clunk echoed from where she fell. *She'll be hurting after this,* Spottedpaw thought and cringed when she remembered her own first day of training.

"Bored yet?" her mentor mumbled and wrapped his tail around his paws. With a rush of embarrassment, Spottedpaw realized that he must have noticed her tuning the others out. She ducked her head apologetically, at which her mentor only chuckled and nodded to the other two in the cave. Spottedpaw cast her gaze back to the center of the room and noticed that they had begun to spar with one another.

"You have to pay attention to multiple things at once, Nightpaw," Mudwing instructed as he swiped his paws at her relentlessly. "My paw up here—" he swiped at her from above, "—is just a distraction for this." While Nightpaw was busy avoiding the

downward slash, the black-and-white tom had hooked his other paw forward. With a single swipe he had knocked her paws from underneath her and Spottedpaw winced at the impact of her friend's body against the stone floor.

"You know, she was training almost all day yesterday," Hawkscar murmured as the she-cat leaped right back to her paws and began sparring again. "She's got a lot of determination for such a new apprentice."

"She sure does. Is there a reason we're watching, though? Shouldn't we be practicing in the forest?" Spottedpaw twitched an ear as she spoke; they both knew there was now a threat of war looming over them all. She wanted to be ready for anything that happened, and this cave was not helping her with that.

"I want you to spar with her; practice what you know. It's been a while since you practiced in the caves, and I've taught you almost everything I can about fighting in the forest." By now, the two training cats had stopped and Mudwing was padding over to them. Hawkscar flicked his tail and added, "Besides, Mudwing and I need to speak. Go on, now." Spottedpaw stumbled a bit as her mentor nudged her towards Nightpaw. She glanced back at him quickly and padded towards the other apprentice who had been waiting patiently in the center of the cave.

"So . . . what are we practicing first?" the golden molly asked awkwardly. Nightpaw was all too eager to choose as she bounced towards her companion.

"Oh, I know! Check out this new defensive stance I learned!" the slender molly chirped. Spottedpaw stiffened and got ready to spar as her friend got into position, but the result froze her paws in place.

"What in the world are you doing?" she asked slowly. After a slight hesitation, she sat down and gave Nightpaw a funny look. The speckled apprentice had somehow balanced on one front paw and the opposite hind leg, her remaining two legs stuck out awkwardly in the air and her tail wobbling as she maintained her balance. *Some stance!* Spottedpaw thought as she gawked. *That*

wouldn't save her from any blow I know! Suddenly Nightpaw darted forward, slamming into Spottedpaw and knocking her right off of her paws. Spottedpaw let out a gasp of surprise and held back a yelp as Nightpaw slammed her down against the cold ground.

Almost immediately Spottedpaw tried to spring back onto her paws, though she wasn't quite fast enough. Nightpaw shot her front paws forward and pinned Spottedpaw down with a surprising amount of strength; one paw square on her chest, the other threatening to press against her throat. Spottedpaw looked up at the other apprentice, shocked by the sudden display of strength.

"That," Nightpaw smirked playfully, "was a distraction." After a moment of smug silence, she burst out laughing and removed some weight from Spottedpaw. At the top of the cave there was a small crack where a streak of sunshine broke through, partially illuminating the grey-speckled she-cat. Spottedpaw watched for a moment before letting a quiet laugh escape. Despite being pressed against the ice-cold ground, her body felt warmed from her ears to the tip of her tail. A surge of energy coursed through her and she heaved herself upwards to begin playfully sparring with her denmate. Spottedpaw eyed her opponent carefully; Nightpaw was clearly much stronger than she appeared.

"How's this for a distraction?" Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes when she spotted a pile of dust and pebbles. She reached out with her paw and scattered them towards Nightpaw, being careful not to aim for her face. Nightpaw let out a yelp of surprise and ducked away from the shards. Spottedpaw saw her chance and leaped forward to gently cuff Nightpaw's muzzle with a few direct blows. Nightpaw reeled back and launched a counterattack on her fellow apprentice. Spottedpaw did her best to weave around a flurry of jabs coming from her friend, finding it hard not to get disoriented by all the movements. The two of them dove around the other's blows; every so often a paw would make contact, a few landing slightly more aggressively than intended.

Spottedpaw noticed Nightpaw step awkwardly and used it to her advantage. She shot her paw forward to knock her off balance and then dove towards her, only to get taken by surprise once again. When Nightpaw began wobbling precariously, she ducked around

Spottedpaw's lunge and flung herself at the other she-cat. The golden apprentice was once again knocked right off of her paws, this time hitting the ground so hard that the wind got knocked out of her. Nightpaw stumbled and landed on her more heavily than before, her paw pressing hard against the molly's throat. Spottedpaw's eyes widened slightly at the pressure. The sensation reminded her of how Deadeye had nearly choked her in his den. A chilling feeling of dread overran her previous warmth and her vision blurred as she recalled the feeling of his claws piercing her skin.

"Spottedpaw, are you alright?" Nightpaw worried when she saw her denmate's expression. When she realized how hard she had been pressing her paw against Spottedpaw, she quickly pulled back. "Oh, goodness, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed and leaned forward. Nightpaw's whiskers brushed gently against Spottedpaw's face and the sensation sent shivers down the dazed she-cat's spine, yanking her mind back to reality. Spottedpaw glanced at their mentors and realized that their fumble had caught the warriors' attention. She quickly scrambled to her paws and shook her pelt out.

"It's okay, we landed pretty hard after all," the golden apprentice assured, quickly getting back into a sparring stance. Nightpaw looked uncertain for a moment before taking a defensive stance herself. As they circled around each other slowly Spottedpaw snuck a glance at their mentors. She gave a sigh of relief when she saw that they had become deeply involved in their previous conversations once again. While her eyes were elsewhere, she heard Nightpaw scuff against the stone floor and instinctively ducked—satisfaction welled up within her when a paw went flying over her head. As she stood back up to face the dappled she-cat her vision began blurring once again. Spottedpaw blinked and staggered a bit, feeling very disoriented.

When she looked around she realized that the cave was now full of viscous eyes gleaming in the darkness. Cats around her were fighting, though it was eerily silent. Spottedpaw shuddered and raked her gaze around wildly. She didn't understand what was happening—she knew she had just been in the cave training with Nightpaw. There wasn't a single familiar face in the surrounding

cats.

“Spottedpaw, you must . . . has been done . . . .” Spottedpaw whipped her head around. *Is this some kind of dream?* she wondered desperately. As the fighting worsened, cats passed through her as if she were just a ghost to them. There was no sign of a cat who had noticed her, let alone one that recognized her.

“. . . undo what has been done . . . .” The voice rang clearly in her ears this time. The she-cat spun around and searched desperately for the source. Suddenly the fighting ceased and all the cats stared at her hungrily, their eyes battle-crazed. Spottedpaw jumped back when ice-cold water lapped at her paws—she glanced down and saw that pitch-black water had started seeping into the cave. Fear coursed through her as it started filling faster and faster, seeping up to her belly and shocking her at every touch.

“Spottedpaw!” This time it sounded like Nightpaw. “Hawkscar, something’s wrong.” She looked around desperately for her new friend, but at every turn she was only faced with the crazed glares. Spottedpaw winced as she felt herself get pushed harshly, though there was no culprit nearby.

“Spottedpaw, snap out of it.” This time it sounded like Hawkscar was speaking right into her ear. She whirled around and screwed her eyes shut, willing herself out of this strange walking nightmare. When she opened her eyes she was standing in the cave with her campmates once again, though now Nightpaw and both of their mentors were watching her worriedly. Nightpaw stepped forward, her eyes round with concern.

“Spottedpaw, are you okay?” she asked hurriedly. Hawkscar cleared his throat and took a pawstep forward. The smaller, grey-speckled molly stepped back awkwardly and stood by her own mentor.

“What happened?” Hawkscar turned to Spottedpaw and spoke with a soft tone. Spottedpaw stared at him blankly and searched for her voice.

“I- I don’t know,” she croaked at last. The shock of what she had

seen was finally beginning to set in. She desperately tried to wrap her mind around it—it was the same things that had happened in her dreams, the same weird voice that she had heard night after night. *It's like a bunch of cats were speaking at once. Why is this happening to me?* she wondered, feeling utterly hopeless.

"We were just sparring," Nightpaw fretted and stepped forward again, but made sure to give Spottedpaw space. "I had her pinned and she looked like she'd seen a ghost—but she got back up, so I thought she was fine! But then she just stopped and . . . her eyes got all glazed over like she was seeing something that wasn't here." As she spoke, Nightpaw let her voice grow quieter and quieter until it was barely a whisper. Mudwing coughed softly, yet deliberately, as though asking for a moment to speak.

"Maybe we should tell Frozenleaf," he suggested and gave Hawkscar a quick glance. "Hawkscar, you mentioned that she's been having some serious nightmares . . . maybe the two things are related, you know?"

"Absolutely not," Hawkscar hissed. "Think carefully about what you're suggesting, Mudwing. I don't even want to imagine what Frozenleaf would take from this." The cream-furred tom lashed his tail in a brief moment of agitation and turned to his apprentice. "I think that's enough training for today—Nightpaw, Mudwing, please don't mention this to anyone yet. She was probably just tired, right Spottedpaw?"

Spottedpaw nodded quickly and willed herself to believe it was as simple as that. Whatever was happening to her was well beyond her understanding, but whenever she considered telling Frozenleaf a strong feeling of foreboding consumed her. If Shadestar was real, and if he was telling the truth, she could only imagine how much trouble she would be in if Frozenleaf found out. *But it isn't real,* she told herself crossly. *It's just a stupid, made-up cat telling me crazy things. That's all!* Mudwing eyed the two of them carefully and gave in with a sigh.

"Alright. I understand what you mean, Hawkscar. Don't worry, Nightpaw and I won't say anything until you're sure it's something to be concerned about." Mudwing dipped his head to Hawkscar and

led Nightpaw out of the training cave.

“As for you,” Hawkscar started, turning towards Spottedpaw once again. “We won’t talk about this again if you don’t want to—go get some rest if you need it. Just remember that we have to be prepared to go to battle at any moment now. BlazeClan has been increasing their own border patrols, you know.” Spottedpaw gave a hesitant nod.

“I’ll be ready, Hawkscar, don’t worry,” she mumbled before retreating from the den herself. Upon entering the main cave, she saw that Nightpaw had joined her siblings—Pearlpaw was, to nobody’s surprise, carrying on about going outside for the first time. Rabbitpaw and Brownpaw were listening, though each looked equally nervous. Nightpaw was sitting a few tail lengths away and looked as though she wasn’t fully listening. Spottedpaw accidentally caught her eye and felt her fur heat up in embarrassment. She turned to go fetch a meal when several cats rushed through the cave entrance; it was the Greyheart and Redflight from the sunhigh patrol.

Several cats gasped and began murmuring as they spotted the flustered warriors. Redflight was limping slightly; blood trickled down his front foreleg and dripped onto the cave floor. Thornheart looked up from where she was sharing a vole with her brother, Finclaw, and rushed to the tortoiseshell tom’s side. Spottedpaw watched curiously as Greyheart took a few strides forward as cats peered out of their dens. A closer look showed that even her father was sporting several new but minor wounds on top of all his older scars.

“Deadeye!” the large tom called. Spottedpaw glanced around as the rest of the cats emerged from their dens; she saw Fernpaw and Riverpaw sitting together near the apprentices’ den, but Dustpaw was nowhere in sight. When she looked back around, she noticed that both Jaggedthorn and Rocksplash were missing as well and realized that they must have been on the sunhigh patrol as well.

“Greyheart, what is the meaning of this?” Deadeye stalked out of his den and up to Greyheart. “What happened?”

“There were BlazeClan warriors instigating an argument at the border, sir,” the golden tom reported and lowered his head to their leader. “It escalated quickly, and they outnumbered us. I had to escort Redflight back so he could get medical attention—and so I could get backup. Dustpaw, Rocksplash, and Jaggedthorn are holding them off, but they need help.”

Deadeye snarled and swung around. “Those fleabags have crossed me for the *final* time. I want every able cat out on that border! New apprentices and their mentors will stay and train diligently. Redflight, go see Frozenleaf immediately. Clawtail, come to my den. You’re all dismissed.” The one-eyed tom stormed to his den with his tail lashing furiously. Clawtail was close behind him and as soon as the two vanished out of sight, the cave began bustling with activity. Spottedpaw sprang to her paws as her siblings rushed up to her, both of their eyes gleaming in excitement. She noticed Nightpaw and her siblings being rushed to the training hall by their mentors—the litter looked just as excited as Riverpaw and Fernpaw. Spottedpaw, on the other hand, was having a hard time sharing the excitement.

“Foxleap, could you watch over Rabbitpaw while I help Redflight to the medicine den?” Thornheart called before helping her friend through the cave. Spottedpaw noticed her mother roll her eyes at the young pair of cats before guiding the rest of apprentices into the training cave.

“Spottedpaw,” Hawkscar called and rushed over to her. “Come on. Deadeye said he wants you to get some real battle experience, this is your chance.” While Spottedpaw’s heart fell to her stomach she saw her siblings perk up next to her.

“What about us?” Fernpaw chirped from her side. “We wanna fight too!” Before Hawkscar could respond, both Coldstep and Redclaw padded up.

“Neither of you have shown enough progress to be ready for battle,” Coldstep mewed harshly. Her twitching tail tip gave away her anxiety at the situation. “You two are to train with the other apprentices—if we need assistance, we’ll send for help.” The two mentors rushed out of the caves before the downcast apprentices

could respond. Spottedpaw cast them an apologetic glance as Hawkscar urged her after the other warriors. After a moment of hesitation, Spottedpaw took off in pursuit of the other cats who had left.

She squeezed through the cave entrance with Hawkscar close on her tail. When she burst out at the end, she nearly teetered off of the cliff edge. While she tried not to lose her balance, Hawkscar squeezed out behind her and leaned forward. The cream tom grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and yanked her back onto a thicker part of the cliff and, without a single word, took off into the forest. Spottedpaw immediately pelted after her mentor, sending pebbles flying behind her. Ferns and twigs whipped at her face and sides as she raced through the forest.

“This way,” Hawkscar grunted back at her and veered off to the left. Spottedpaw did her best to ignore the stinging from where the plants had lashed her. As the two cats raced alongside each other, she heard the voices of countless cats yowling. Finally, they saw flashes of pelts among the foliage—two cats rolled out in front of them in a snarling, bloody tumble. Hawkscar immediately put his tail in front of Spottedpaw to stop her and nudged her to crouch in the nearby ferns. When the cats broke apart, Spottedpaw saw that it had been Jaggedthorn and the brown-and-white tabby that she recognized as Bouncepool. She ducked lower in the ferns when another, paler brown tabby tom appeared by the BlazeClan warrior and they chased Jaggedthorn off. Spottedpaw exchanged a look with her mentor and they both dashed out of their leafy hiding spot and into the fray.

Almost immediately Hawkscar vanished. Spottedpaw found herself facing a large, smoke-furred tom. The tom growled and swiped at her, catching her ear with his claw. Spottedpaw winced as her skin seared with pain and tried to remember what Hawkscar had taught her. She ducked below his swipes and hesitantly swiped back at him. Deep down she knew it was wrong to go to war over such barren strips of land, and that it was wrong for them to attack cats who were already suffering.

"What's wrong?" the tom taunted her and clawed her shoulder. "Afraid to get your claws dirty?" Frustration bubbled up inside of

Spottedpaw. That wasn't it at all! She growled and lashed at his face, immediately feeling guilty when blood welled up on his cheek. The dark-furred warrior narrowed his eyes and towered over Spottedpaw threateningly. He raised a paw with claws unsheathed as Spottedpaw shrunk away.

"Rockstorm!" There was a flash of grey as a familiar-looking tom rushed up. "Pouncefur needs help—she's being cornered. I can handle this scrawny apprentice, go!" The smoky tom narrowed his eyes and nodded before haring off into the undergrowth.

"Jayleaf?" Spottedpaw breathed and felt a wave of relief crash over her. "Oh, thank goodness—" She got cut off by a series of sheathed paws swiping at her relentlessly.

"Shut up and duck," Jayleaf hissed as he swung his paw over Spottedpaw's head. "Back towards that thick patch of brambles over there—but don't stop fighting me." He started muttering where he would aim so that Spottedpaw could avoid his attacks. Every so often he threw in a surprise jab and once they had neared the bramble thicket, he pulled Spottedpaw inside.

"Jayleaf, what are you doing?" Spottedpaw blurted out once they were safely hidden within the branches.

"Rockstorm would have seriously hurt you," the grey tabby murmured softly. "He's got a grudge against you and your . . . your group, and I didn't want you to end up injured."

"We didn't have to pretend to fight, though; It isn't like someone was watching us," Spottedpaw snorted, though doubt immediately clawed at her mind. "I know we've talked a bit at Gatherings, but why would you go out of your way to protect me? I'm one of them, you know."

Jayleaf rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Are you *really* one of them? I saw how you held back against Rockstorm—and we all know that Deadeye trains killers. You're no killer, Spottedpaw. Not like he is." Spottedpaw only stared at him for a second, unsure of how to respond. At first, she felt shocked that the other Clans thought of the Gorge like that. After a moment of consideration, she

remembered again how Deadeye behaved and how much he frightened her.

"We have to go before someone sees us," she mumbled with a shudder. "I've already gotten into trouble enough as it is." The apprentice rose to her paws and ducked to exit the bramble thicket. Jayleaf stepped forward and put his paw in her path.

"Spottedpaw," he whispered, his warm amber eyes glittering. "have you ever really had fun?" Spottedpaw paused and gave him a look.

"Of course I have. They allow kits to have fun, you know."

"That's not what I mean," Jayleaf gave a soft chuckle and leaned forward until his whiskers tickled her face. "Meet me here at moonrise."

Before Spottedpaw could respond, screeching erupted from outside of their hiding spot. Both she and Jayleaf ducked, peeking through the branches. Through them she recognized Jaggedthorn fighting another brown tabby she-cat—both mollies had blood dripping from their fur, spattering against the ground as they swayed on their paws. With another blood-curdling yowl Jaggedthorn launched herself at the BlazeClan she-cat.

"Heatherstorm," Jayleaf whispered, tensing up. "I have to help her." He darted out from the bramble thicket to help his Clanmate just to freeze when Heatherstorm hurled Jaggedthorn off of her. The battered brown Gorge molly let out a wail that got cut short as she got thrown against a tree trunk. Spottedpaw felt her breath catch in her throat as Frostheart appeared out of the foliage by the tree.

"My, my," he purred maliciously. "I never pegged you for a killer, Heatherstorm." The molly froze and shook her head quickly.

"N-No, it isn't what it looked like. She was already hurt, Frostheart." Heatherstorm backed away as the cloudy grey stalked towards her. His amber eyes glittered in the sunlight.

"Oh, is it? To me it looks like you just murdered one of our warriors. What is it they say?" Frostheart pretended to think for a second and laughed. "Oh, oh, I got it: an eye for an eye. What do you say, Heatherstorm?" Spottedpaw watched him lunge at Heatherstorm without any hesitation. The BlazeClan she-cat tried to run, but Frostheart caught her, sinking his teeth into her throat and tossing her to the side after she fell limp. Spottedpaw slowly creeped out of the thicket and watched in stunned silence.

"Mother!" She turned and saw Firthistle, Bouncepool, and Talonstrike rushing forward. Frostheart turned on them and the trio halted in their tracks. They stuck together as Frostheart stalked towards them slowly. The ferns beside Spottedpaw rustled and Swallowclaw appeared alongside a large yellow tabby tom.

"BlazeClan!" the yellow tom yowled. "Retreat, now!" All the BlazeClan cats fled except for Swallowclaw and the tom. Frostheart sat up straight and looked at the remaining two toms, his head tilted in amusement. "By killing one of ours, you have ignited a full-on war, Frostheart. Make sure you pass that on to Deadeye, and believe me when I say you will not be ready." At that he stalked forward towards Heatherstorm's bloodied body. Swallowclaw padded after him and deliberately shoved into Frostheart as he passed. Together the two of them lifted their Clanmate's body and carried back into their territory, the ferns and foliage swinging as they passed and hiding them from view.

Frostheart reared up and let out a victorious yowl. Victorious was the farthest thing from how Spottedpaw felt, though. She locked her gaze on where the BlazeClan molly had fallen; her legs felt as though they were frozen in place. She took no notice as her campmates slowly appeared from the bushes around her and joined in on the cheerful cries. Even though the noises around her slurred together, the words from her vision earlier rang clear inside her head. *Undo what has been done.* Her attention came to when her mentor padded up and sat down in front of her.

"Spottedpaw, are you alright?" he murmured. "Did you hit your head?" Spottedpaw shook her head and sat down wordlessly. The cream tom glanced around as Frostheart began leading everyone back to camp—he and Spottedpaw's father, Greyheart carried

Jaggedthorn's tattered body. Hawkscar nudged Spottedpaw and led her alongside the rest of them. What she had witnessed had shaken her right to the core; she knew what they were doing was wrong, and she felt utterly helpless.

Chapter 8

Spottedpaw sat a few fox-lengths away from the Smoothstone. The main cavern was unusually full of cats—most were paying respects to Jaggedthorn. Deadeye sat near the brown tabby's bloodied body, his expression as unreadable as ever. He had offered little to console the cats of the Gorge aside from promises of vengeance, though few cats needed consolation. Frostheart and Snowface sat beside one another, their eyes flashing with rage as they whispered amongst themselves. Greyheart appeared to be much more collected; a glance at his flicking tail, however, revealed just how infuriated he felt. Thornheart hadn't moved from where she'd bowed her head near her mentor's body.

While cats milled about and took turns bowing next to the body, Spottedpaw could only watch blankly. There was nothing to get revenge for—Heatherstorm had only been defending herself, and Frostheart murdered her in cold blood while weaving a story that suggested otherwise. Spottedpaw wanted to feel something, *anything.* A bit of anger at the grey warrior would be sufficient, but all she could feel was a haunting emptiness. Even if she exposed him, what would happen to him? Would Deadeye praise him for being so cunning, so deceptive? The more she thought about it, the more she felt as though she wasn't *with* her campmates, despite physically being there.

By the time she focused back on her surroundings, the rest of the Gorge had gone to their nests and left Spottedpaw feeling wide awake. For a moment she considered going to her nest and trying to sleep, but she knew she wouldn't be able to. As she contemplated what to do, she remembered Jayleaf's invitation to her. *It's got to be about moonrise now,* she mused to herself. *Besides, a brief walk would help me ease my mind.* She rose to her paws and resisted the urge to wince at her aching muscles and stiff joints. With a last glance around, she began padding towards the tunnel leading into the forest.

“Going somewhere?” Hawkscar padded out of the shadows and gave his apprentice a curious look. “It’s late, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Spottedpaw mumbled and dipped her head in embarrassment. “My mind just won’t calm down after today. I was thinking a walk might help me settle down for bed.” She refused to meet her mentor’s eye, knowing that he would see right through her.

Hawkscar stared at her for a few moments and finally responded with, “Alright, but don’t go too far. Be careful of any late-night patrols, too.” Spottedpaw gave her mentor a relieved nod and padded out of the tunnel. The cool, night time breeze initially startled her. After a pause on the cliff’s edge, the breeze eased her nerves. She padded through the moonlit forest and sighed as the rustling of the leaves above her lulled her bustling mind.

Spottedpaw traveled onward, enjoying the beauty around her as it passed. Up until now, she'd never had the time to stop and enjoy the world around her. Ferns laced back and forth among the undergrowth. She looked up as she padded along, noticing how each one of the trees nearly touched the moon above.

When she saw trampled leaves and bloodied flowers, she realized that she had arrived where the fight had taken place. She looked around as she padded closer to the border markers, grimacing when she saw clumps of fur lying on the forest floor.

Once she reached the border, she stopped and looked up at the sky. The moon wasn’t quite touching the treetops yet, but it was well past moonrise. *Maybe he got caught up,* she thought to herself. *He said that before . . . oh, poor Heatherstorm.* She felt a tug at her chest as she stared sadly off into BlazeClan’s territory—just like the one she felt at the Gathering. She shook it off when she spotted the bramble thicket that Jayleaf had helped her hide in—it was right on the borderline. With a last glance around her, she started to crawl underneath the thicket.

“Halt, apprentice.” A voice behind her startled her, causing her to jump several mice-lengths into the air. Spottedpaw spun around with her claws unsheathed, ready to defend herself against whoever

had caught her here. She paused, though, when her gaze locked on the same friendly expression that Jayleaf held so often. This time, there was a hint of amusement in his warm amber eyes. With a quick breath, Spottedpaw forced herself to relax.

"You sure took your time," she mumbled nonchalantly and sat down. The apprentice gave her paw a quick lick while keeping one eye locked on the BlazeClan warrior; as friendly as he'd been, she knew this could all just be a trick to gain an advantage over the Gorge.

"Well, you know, when there's a vigil to attend." Jayleaf gave an awkward chuckle and Spottedpaw immediately felt bad. "I'm sure you guys got held up with the warrior you lost, as well."

"I doubt it was the same," Spottedpaw muttered with a cringe. She remembered how most cats had only used Jaggedthorn's death to swear vengeance. It was clear from the start that Heatherstorm hadn't meant to kill the Gorge molly. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to change the subject. "Anyway, why did you ask me to meet you here?"

Jayleaf merely shot her a smug look in response to the question. His eyes glinted with a hint of something new—a kind of playfulness, perhaps. With a single, beckoning flick of his tail, he turned and raced off along the border. Spottedpaw hesitated for a moment before taking off after him. She struggled to keep up as they hared further away from her home in the caves, following the trees and bushes that marked the line between territories.

Jayleaf stopped right as her legs were starting to burn and she thought she couldn't go on any longer. Spottedpaw nearly barreled into him as she skidded to a stop. The she-cat gave him a questioning look, but before she could utter a word, the tom spoke.

"I had something I wanted to show you," he murmured between a few subtle pants.

"So you couldn't have just said that?" Spottedpaw retorted playfully. Jayleaf shot her an equally playful glance and shook out his fur before padding into BlazeClan territory. When Spottedpaw

hesitated, he turned around and beckoned to her.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured. “Besides, it won’t take too long. Come on!”

Spottedpaw caved and followed him into the strange territory. Almost immediately she noticed that the ground beneath her looked dried and cracked; the undergrowth appeared to be in worse shape. The plants felt brittle underneath Spottedpaw’s toes—what little she could see, at least. She immediately felt a pang of pity for the BlazeClan cat ahead of her, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

Up ahead she noticed some kind of structure, and Jayleaf was leading her right to it. As they neared, she saw that it looked to be made of stone, with sharp edges as if it formed some kind of protective border around something. Lines criss-crossed along the outer walls, creating an odd rectangular pattern.

“What is this?” she breathed out in awe as she eyed the unusual structure. The odd structure looked old; it was crumbling apart in multiple parts, with sizable chunks of stone lying on the surrounding ground.

“Swallowclaw always told me it’s an abandoned Twoleg nest. It looks almost ancient, doesn’t it? Watch this.” Jayleaf began hopping up on the rocks, climbing higher and higher until he reached the top. Pebbles scattered and fell to the earth with each pawstep. Once he was there, he found a comfy spot to perch himself and beckoned to Spottedpaw. When she hesitated, he climbed back down to the lowest ledge.

“I don’t know about that. It doesn’t look very stable,” she mumbled while eyeing the crumbling stone.

“Have you ever really danced on the edge?” Jayleaf teased with a laugh. “Come on, just follow my pawsteps.” He ascended once again—much more slowly this time—and Spottedpaw carefully followed him.

“You know,” she murmured as she climbed upwards, teetering precariously with each step, “we have something like this at the

Gorge, too. We call it Boulderdrop—there are a bunch of huge sharp boulders there. Lots of the other apprentices like to play on them during training. It's really neat, but it doesn't even compare to this." After making it to the top and settling next to Jayleaf carefully, she turned to face the sky. The moon illuminated them with stars dotting the sky like dewdrops on fur.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Jayleaf murmured. With a glance at him, she saw that he followed her gaze. When she didn't respond, he continued speaking. "I mean, knowing that Heatherstorm, or Jaggedthorn can still watch over us from StarClan."

As he said that, Spottedpaw felt herself freeze up a bit. After being told time and time again that StarClan is fake—after being told never to speak of it—part of this felt wrong. But somewhere deep inside her, she felt otherwise. She felt drawn to the twinkly lights overhead, craving some kind of confirmation that StarClan really did exist.

"Y-Yeah," she stammered when she realized Jayleaf was staring at her expectantly. "Yeah, it's– uh, it's nice. We should head back before someone finds us." Jayleaf looked confused but nodded in agreement. The two cats carefully climbed down from the old Twoleg nest and padded alongside the border together before saying their goodbyes and returning to their camps.

Noise filled the apprentices' den and stirred Spottedpaw from her slumber. She yawned and sat up, blinking the sleep from her eyes. Nightpaw was bouncing around the den excitedly while Rabbitpaw and Brownpaw sat together. Brownpaw looked scared out of his fur, while Rabbitpaw reassured him quietly. A few pawsteps away, Pearlpaw sat with her tail curled around her paws. Despite how much the pale tabby tried to hide it, her expression showed that she felt just as excited as Nightpaw.

"We get to go outside!" Nightpaw mewed happily as she danced around. "It's finally happening!"

"Do you ever shut up?" Dustpaw growled from his nest. "Some

of us actually *like* to sleep, you know."

"As if you weren't just as excited about your first day out of the caves," Pearlpaw retorted. Spottedpaw gave an amused snort, remembering how Dustpaw had crossed a border and received enough scoldings to last a lifetime. She padded up to the newer apprentices and nudged Nightpaw playfully.

"Are you guys going to be training?" she asked cheerfully. "Our mentors gave us a hunting assessment on our first day."

"Mudwing told me we'll be training near Boulderdrop! He said we'll learn how to balance real well," the grey apprentice chirped back happily. She lowered her voice and leaned forward, whispering, "Brownpaw's scared, though. He overheard Dustpaw telling Pearlpaw how dangerous it is there."

"It's not dangerous as long as you're careful," Spottedpaw reassured, intentionally raising her voice a bit and giving Dustpaw a pointed glance. Her brother rolled his eyes and shot her a dirty look in return. "I'm sure your mentors are waiting, so go on, and don't worry. They're excellent warriors, they'll be ready to help you guys." As the four apprentices shoved each other out of the den, she remembered that her mother was Rabbitpaw's mentor. She couldn't help wondering if her mother would get more involved with her apprentice than she had been with her own kits.

Spottedpaw looked back at her own littermates. Riverpaw sat awake in his nest, grooming the moss out of his fur. Her sister, Fernpaw sat near Dustpaw, who'd been sulking in the corner of the den. An awkward silence fell upon the litter as they glanced between each other.

"Do any of you have a free day today?" Riverpaw broke the silence and sat up straight. "Fireclaw hasn't given me any tasks yet."

"Rocksplash said that I have to revisit my defensive stance training," Dustpaw muttered bitterly. For the first time, Spottedpaw noticed that scratches covered his pelt, and his ear now had a noticeable nick in it.

“I’m helping Shortpaw gather herbs and moss for anyone who got hurt,” Fernpaw mumbled shyly. “I’d offer for you guys to come, but he said more paws would only make it more confusing.” Spottedpaw shot her sister a curious glance before shrugging it off. She always seemed rather shy when it came to other cats.

“Well, *I’m* going to go ask Hawkscar if there’s anything I should do,” she spoke in between yawns as the exhaustion from her walk the night before hit her with full force. She turned and exited the den, leaving her littermates to talk amongst themselves before attending to their own duties. When she entered the main cave, Spottedpaw glanced around slowly.

At first, she couldn’t spot her mentor. It was odd for him to sleep in, even on a slow day like this. With a second sweeping gaze she glimpsed his familiar creamy fur and padded over to him slowly. As she got closer, Spottedpaw noticed that he was talking to Thornheart a few tail-lengths away from Ironheart’s litter and the other mentors.

“Don’t worry,” he was murmuring as his apprentice padded up. “Having your first apprentice might seem daunting at first, but you’ll get used to it. Just watch Foxleap if you end up lost on what to do.” Spottedpaw sat down patiently and waited for them to finish speaking.

“Hawkscar—” The tom immediately interrupted Spottedpaw.

“That was quite a lengthy walk you had last night, Spottedpaw,” he muttered, turning on his apprentice while maintaining a nonchalant composure. When the she-cat only shuffled her paws uncomfortably, he continued. “You should be careful when you wander around at night. You don’t want to end up getting confronted by some cat from another Clan—or even just distracted.” Spottedpaw stared at her mentor without responding at first. How he worded things hinted that he knew about Spottedpaw’s adventure the night before, but when their eyes met he gave nothing away.

“Sorry, Hawkscar,” she mumbled sheepishly. “I just wanted to ask you if there was anything you wanted me to do today? I know

Nightpaw and the others are training, and everyone else is helping."

Her mentor gave her a harsh stare before speaking again. "Actually, I think the elders need tending to. Nobody's been looking after them as much with all this training and fighting." Spottedpaw was about to voice her protest when her mentor shot her a meaningful glare. "They'd probably enjoy some company, you know."

"Yes, Hawkscar," she muttered begrudgingly as she padded off to the elders' den. Luckily, living in the caves meant that the elders rarely got ticks or fleas, though it brought on plenty of other complaints.

"Is that my favorite little warrior-to-be?" Molestrike called with a wheeze as soon as Spottedpaw set paw inside their den. "Spottedpaw, you've hardly even come to visit since you've started your apprenticeship!"

"Oh, leave the apprentice be, mother," Frogtooth muttered from her nest. The blinded molly looked as restless as ever as Spottedpaw padded over. "It's about time they sent someone, though. I might be young, but this nest sure doesn't make me feel it at all. Would you be a dear and fetch me some new moss?"

"Of course, Frogtooth. Any for you, Molestrike?" Spottedpaw glanced at the older she-cat, trying not to wince at her frail state. The elder had been bony for as long as Spottedpaw could remember, but what she saw now gave her a grave feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Sure, some fresh moss would be nice. Would you mind fetching me a few poppy seeds from Frozenleaf while you're at it? My joints have just been keeping me awake lately; it must be this cold den." Spottedpaw nodded and ducked out of the den to fulfill their requests. She felt a creeping sense of foreboding as she approached Frozenleaf's den, but she swallowed and pushed her way inside.

"Frozenleaf?" she called out hesitantly. "I'm here to collect some spare moss from our stash for the elders, but Molestrike also asked for some poppy seeds." She nosed her way through an unsorted pile

of herbs until she found their fresh moss pile, grasping several clumps in her jaws.

“Poppy seeds? For what?” Frozenleaf popped her head out of a crevice further back in the den, startling Spottedpaw.

“Heuh hoins ah achin,” Spottedpaw mumbled around the moss before spitting it out. “Her sore joints have been keeping her awake.”

“Ah, she doesn’t need poppy seeds just yet. You tell her I’ll be by shortly with some ragwort and juniper berries.” Spottedpaw nodded and picked up the moss clumps once again. While she padded out of the den, she felt Frozenleaf’s gaze fixated on her for every second, but ignored it. She had her own things to worry about without Frozenleaf making it worse.

She entered the elders’ den once more and nudged the elders out of their nests to give them the fresh bedding. While she carefully placed the moss around Molestrike’s nest for extra padding, she felt the elderly molly watching her. Her fur crawled at the feeling, but she did her best to ignore it.

“Have I ever told you the story about the *Great Rift,* Spottedpaw?” Molestrike wheezed after a silence. “When the Gorge came to be?”

“Not exactly,” she responded absent-mindedly. She might have enjoyed these nursery stories as a kit, but she knew she shouldn’t pay attention to them anymore.

“Now, I know you kits don’t get told about this much, but Crowstar brought our little group to fruition. Many seasons ago, there was a mighty war between us and the other Clans. The other Clans tried desperately to keep it from happening, but when Crowstar killed the mighty Ivorystar, a raging battle broke loose.” Spottedpaw hesitated a bit as she remembered her haunting dreams, and how she had seen Ivorystar sacrifice herself for her own warrior. The image of the pale leader's blood-soaked fur flashed through her mind, and she couldn’t help the shudder that ran through her body.

“Molestrike, keep your voice down,” Frogtooth hissed. “You know that Clawtail won't be able to protect you forever if you keep spewing this nonsense."

“You doubt your sister, Frogtooth. Deadeye listens to her almost as much as Frozenleaf. Anyway, for ages Crowstar—when he was still Crowthorn, tried again and again to convince his leader to make a move with his plan. Despite all of his efforts, Sha—”

“Molestrike!” Frogtooth hissed again, more serious than ever. “If any cat were to hear you, Clawtail would have no power to protect you.” Spottedpaw had frozen where she was finishing up with Molestrike’s nest. *Was she about to say Shadestar?* she thought to herself as she felt her body get chilled. *There’s no way. That's just a stupid, made-up cat, right?*

“Fine. I won’t say it.” Molestrike rolled her eyes and leaned in toward Spottedpaw. The elder's sour breath filled her senses as she whispered, “Legend says that Crowstar’s plan blatantly defied the will of StarClan, and they have cut off contact with us as our eternal punishment.”

“Don’t fill this apprentice’s head with nonsense,” Frogtooth snapped as Molestrike rolled backwards in delirious laughter. “StarClan is a nursery myth for weak-hearted cats and don’t you forget that.” Spottedpaw nodded and slowly moved to Frogtooth’s nest to carefully lay out the rest of the moss. A commotion came from the main cave as she finished and she quickly backed out of the den, nodding to the two elders as she did so.

Nightpaw and the others had returned from training, but a rancid fear-scent emanated from them. There was a faint scent of blood underneath that. Upon inspecting, she saw Brownpaw limping heavily with Rabbitpaw supporting him.

“Rabbitpaw, take your brother to the medicine den,” Foxleap instructed calmly. “He’ll be fine, don’t you worry.” Spottedpaw padded up curiously and watched the toms make their way to the medicine den. She paused when she reached Nightpaw, shooting her a questioning glance.

“Brownpaw fell off of Boulderdrop,” the pretty molly explained under her breath. “He looks really hurt, but Foxleap said she thinks it’s just a wrenched shoulder. I don’t understand how he fell, though. Thornheart was right there with him.” Spottedpaw nodded softly in understanding, glancing at the brown tabby mentor. Thornheart had moved to sit by Redflight, seemingly unbothered by her apprentice’s injury.

“Maybe he slipped when she wasn’t looking,” she mused thoughtfully. Her friend still looked unsure, so she gave her a nudge. “I’m sure he’ll be fine. Frozenleaf’s the best medicine cat in the entire forest.”

Nightpaw nodded hesitantly. “Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Spottedpaw.” The grey-speckled she-cat gave her an appreciative headbutt. Spottedpaw’s ears heated up in embarrassment and she looked off to the side shyly. She wanted nothing more than to talk to her friend for ages. The golden molly opened her mouth to speak, but got interrupted by a commotion towards the middle of the cavern.

“Where is Thornheart?” Ironheart's voice boomed as she rushed over, her pelt bristling and her eyes furious. Spottedpaw and Nightpaw looked over in sync as the ginger warrior stormed up to her kit’s mentor.

“He slipped and fell,” Thornheart stated dryly before Ironheart could accuse her of anything. “Accidents happen. What else do you want me to say?” Ironheart's eyes grew wild when the warrior casually drew a paw over her ear.

The molly growled something at Thornheart. Ironheart's fur fluffed up until she was nearly twice her size, and her voice raised rapidly in distress. The cave slowly filled with curious cats as Ironheart lashed her tail furiously. Clawtail emerged from the crowd of curious eyes, her tail bristled at the outburst.

“What is the meaning of this?” Clawtail demanded and rushed over. The regent's eyes were cold with anger at the commotion. “Ironheart, back down from this before Deadeye—”

“Before Deadeye *what?”* Deadeye emerged from his den, his eye fixated on the arguing cats. Clawtail immediately dipped her head to the black tom and backed down. “Ironheart, you were told not to get attached. I’m sure that whatever happened to your *little kit* was an accident.” The she-cat visibly trembled as Deadeye approached her.

“B-But Deadeye—”

“If you make one more outburst like this against the mentors I choose for *my* apprentices, I don’t think I need to tell you what will happen. Do I make myself clear?” Spottedpaw and Nightpaw glanced at each other nervously. Off to the side, Spottedpaw noticed Pearlpaw watching with an unusual spark in her eyes. The pale she-cat showed more interest in this than Spottedpaw remembered ever seeing before.

“Crystal.” Within an instant, Ironheart had regained her composure. She fixed an icy gaze on the one-eyed leader before returning to her own duties without another word. All the curious cats returned to their activities, while Spottedpaw felt frozen to her spot next to Nightpaw.

She noticed her father watching Deadeye curiously from the shadows, his dull greyish eyes unusually full of emotion. With each passing sunrise Deadeye seemed more and more on edge, and Spottedpaw felt uncomfortable watching the rest of the warriors wholeheartedly support him. An ice-cold feeling of dread pooled in her stomach as she wondered what exactly Deadeye was capable of. She knew that the lengths he would go to achieve his goals were immeasurable, and something told her that this path would only end in more bloodshed.

Chapter 9

[image]

Spottedpaw purred as she shared a thrush with Nightpaw. The two of them watched Brownpaw play with Rabbitpaw, the two toms tumbling around outside the apprentices' den. Over a half moon had passed since Brownpaw had fallen at Boulderdrop. Frozenleaf determined that he merely had a wrenched shoulder and a few scrapes, and the tabby tom healed quickly enough. However, the apprentice had only grown more skittish than ever. Every time Spottedpaw noticed Rabbitpaw go to flip him over, his brother visibly panicked and tried to keep himself from being overturned.

Spottedpaw glanced at Nightpaw, noticing how closely the grey molly was watching her littermates. Brownpaw's newfound anxiety was obvious to every cat in the Gorge, especially to his sister. Spottedpaw gave her friend a gentle nudge.

"He'll be fine," she murmured softly. Nightpaw shot her a grateful glance and returned the nudge somewhat playfully. After a few moments of silence, Nightpaw rose to her paws and padded off to her brothers. Spottedpaw watched her friend leave and finished the thrush. Now that Nightpaw had left her alone, her thoughts flooded her mind.

Ever since Brownpaw fell at Boulderdrop, she started to get more nightmares; Shadestar haunted her dreams nearly every night, though now his words were hazy and incomprehensible. She told herself it was due to Molestrike's delirious ramblings. The elder had since fallen ill with whitecough. It was the first illness of leaf-fall, and according to Frozenleaf it was early for anyone to be falling ill.

When cats around the Gorge started to fret, the healer insisted that since it was only whitecough, it was nothing to worry about, but Spottedpaw couldn't keep herself from doing exactly that. Molestrike was growing frailer by the day, and she was certain she'd heard one of Deadeye's kits catching a cough. Spottedpaw might just be an apprentice, but she knew that the illness was especially

dangerous to elders and kits. Even worse, if Frozenleaf and Shortpaw didn't properly manage it, it could ravage the entire camp.

"Spottedpaw, are you listening to me?" Spottedpaw's thoughts had consumed her so much that she hadn't noticed that Hawkscar approached her. "We'll be going out to train at moonrise. I want to make sure you get some proper nighttime practice in."

Spottedpaw gave her mentor a hasty nod as he trotted off. The cream tom joined Mudwing and Fireclaw by the fresh-kill pile, each of the toms grabbing a small piece to eat with one another. Movement from the nursery demanded Spottedpaw's attention. One by one, Deadeye's kits came tumbling out into the bigger cave. Dapplekit looked just like her mother, Blackkit like their father, and Sunkit looked like a weird mixture of the two. She was almost entirely black with some orange tabby splotches dotting her body.

Spottedpaw had to hold back a purr of amusement while she watched the three kits tumble around in the clearing. Suddenly they broke apart as Dapplekit gave in to a fit of coughing. She stopped almost as soon as she started though, and Spottedpaw assumed that it was just caused by the dust that the kits had stirred up. *What if they caught whitecough, though?* she wondered. *They're nearly big enough to be apprentices now—it would spread through the camp like wildfire.* The apprentice tilted her head as she watched the kits, finding herself desperately hoping that they stayed healthy.

"Deadeye told me about what you've been doing with those BlazeClan cats." Spottedpaw nearly jumped out of her fur when Greyheart spoke to her. The tom had approached her so quietly that, if she didn't know better, she would say he appeared out of thin air. She turned her gaze to her father hesitantly, immediately growing uncomfortable when she saw how curious he looked. His greyish eyes held an odd glint that she wasn't sure she trusted.

"Yeah," Spottedpaw responded slowly. "I really felt bad about what happened at the border, you know? I just wanted to make it up to Deadeye somehow." She held the scarred warrior's gaze and willed herself not to shake in his presence. Until now, her father had shown next to no interest in her activities. *I can guess what*

changed, she thought bitterly to herself. *Of course he's interested now that he thinks that I'm doing Deadeye's bidding.* She resisted the urge to roll her eyes when her father seemed to glow with pride.

"I'm glad that one of my children knows how to get things done," Greyheart purred, watching his daughter closely. "No offense to your siblings, of course. They just don't have the same ambition as some of us." Spottedpaw forced an enthusiastic nod and found herself scanning the clearing for her mentor—or really any other cat that would give her an excuse to leave the conversation.

"Some cats just need a nudge in the right direction," she mumbled, cringing at her own words. Her heart leapt when she spotted her mentor resting with Mudwing. "S-Sorry, Greyheart, but I have to go train with Hawkscar." Spottedpaw rushed off without waiting for her father's response. Once she neared her mentor, she nudged him gently with her paw.

"Spottedpaw? It's still a little early for training," Hawkscar shot her a look, tilting his head a bit.

"I thought maybe we could get a head start?" Spottedpaw gave her mentor a sheepish glance. "It's never too early, right?" She felt her fur heat up in embarrassment when she caught an amused glance from Mudwing.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt anything," Hawkscar mewed after a few moments of thought. "We won't be able to start the training until moonrise, though, so don't get too antsy. I'll see you in a while, Mudwing." He shot his small friend an apologetic glance and rose to his paws slowly. The cream-striped tom beckoned to his apprentice and together the two of them padded out into the forest.

The sunset cast long shadows across the forest as the warmth of the day ebbed away. Spottedpaw padded alongside her mentor wordlessly. She wasn't sure where the cream tom wanted to lead her—wherever it was, she'd never taken this route. Hawkscar's steely silence was the only thing keeping her from bringing it up.

He finally stopped at an unfamiliar clearing. Spottedpaw knew for a fact that they hadn't left the territory, but she couldn't quite

figure out where they were. *This must be at one of the far edges of the territory,* she thought to herself as she looked around. Hawkscar padded to the center of the clearing and sat without so much as a word. Spottedpaw padded up to him, her confusion written all over her face.

When her mentor remained silent, Spottedpaw followed his lead. She settled next to the cream-striped warrior and watched the sun disappear over the horizon. Only when the moon peeked over the edges of the forest did Hawkscar finally speak. He motioned towards various pools of moonlight.

"Do you see that—how the moon casts light on the forest even at the earliest sign of it?" He kept his voice soft, and he looked more at peace than Spottedpaw had ever seen. "Spottedpaw, there will come a time when you need to know how to use the light—and shadows—to your advantage. This is especially hard when your pelt doesn't blend with the darkness—or if it reflects the light."

Hawkscar padded into a patch of direct moonlight and nodded to his own fur. The moonlight illuminated him, giving him an elegant glow. After a moment he left the light spot and dove into some nearby bushes. Once the foliage fell still, there was no trace of him. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and peered at the plants, searching for her teacher.

"Neat trick, isn't it?" Spottedpaw nearly jumped out of her fur when her mentor popped his head out of the ferns directly ahead of her. "Keep in mind that it won't work if whoever or whatever you're hiding from is following your scent trail. That's a lesson for another time, though. Come here, and I'll show you how to use the night to your advantage."

Spottedpaw nodded and padded up to him. She copied his every move for ages until she had the movements down. During the training, Hawkscar withheld praise until he was certain that she could repeat the techniques. Every time she earned his praise, Spottedpaw felt pride well up inside her. She finally felt like she could become the warrior she always dreamt of being.

Halfway to moonhigh, the two cats stopped for a brief break.

Spottedpaw peered at the moon and stars as they peeked down at her through the branches overhead. So much had happened in the last few moons, and yet Spottedpaw knew that she'd barely begun to understand the world. With a glance at her teacher, she wondered if he had faced the same issues that she faced.

"Hawkscar, what was your apprenticeship like?" She sat down and scuffed her paws at the ground distractedly. More than anything, she hoped that her mentor could relate to her experiences. She felt like she couldn't relate to any of her siblings anymore, especially Dustpaw.

With each passing sunrise, she felt more and more isolated from her siblings. Dustpaw, though he didn't pick fights with her anymore, always shot her dirty looks. She constantly noticed the mousey brown tom whispering with Fernpaw and Pearlpaw, and the two she-cats had started to give her the same sour looks. Riverpaw spoke much more kindly to Spottedpaw, and of her three littermates she felt like he understood her the most. Her brown tabby brother always offered her reassurance whenever Dustpaw put her down. Her brother was easily almost as close to her as Nightpaw or Hawkscar, though she still felt some emotional distance with him.

"My apprenticeship?" The cream tom looked at his apprentice, taken aback by the sudden question. "There's a story behind my warrior name, you know . . . though I get the feeling that it's not exactly what you're talking about." Hawkscar rocked back on his haunches and gave his apprentice a quizzical look. The near-full moon illuminated his fluffy fur, showcasing the now-faint yet still haunting scar on his shoulder. Spottedpaw had never noticed it until now, realizing that her mentor's long fur hid it well.

The apprentice sat down with a *thump* as she felt moons of confusion simmer inside her. She opened her mouth to speak, but most of her words got caught in her throat. She had no idea where to start. "Well, did you ever . . . have weird dreams?"

"Are your nightmares still bothering you?" Hawkscar gave a soft chuckle, though his expression remained sincere. "Spottedpaw, all cats get nightmares from time to time. Sure, getting them as often

as you do could be a cause for concern, but it just happens sometimes. We can ask Frozenleaf for more poppy seeds, you know." Spottedpaw felt herself begin to panic at the mention of the healer. She immediately regretted confiding in her mentor, but she couldn't stop herself now.

"But what if it doesn't *just happen?* What if this—these messed up dreams, what if they aren't normal?" Distress overcame Spottedpaw as she dug her claws into the soil beneath her. When she met her mentor's gaze she realized that he looked concerned, so she quietly added, "I- I mean, you know, with how often I get them . . . ." She cast her gaze to the ground, feeling smaller than ever. Her mentor's searching gaze burnt into her fur and made her feel incredibly self-conscious.

"Spottedpaw, look at me," he mewed, his tone suddenly much more serious than before. Spottedpaw glanced up and held his gaze, resisting the urge to shrink away. "Not too long ago you mentioned that Frozenleaf got weirdly interested in your dreams—she's a healer, for crying out loud. What reason would she have for being so interested in some apprentice's dreams? Be honest with me." The apprentice felt her pent-up anxiety and distress bubble over, turning into a confusing mixture of anger. She started pacing in circles as paranoia picked at the back of her mind.

"What are you trying to say?" she demanded as moons of emotional turmoil burst inside her, the ground beginning to sway beneath her. Spottedpaw felt cornered, or even accused. "You're acting like you need to be suspicious of me or something—suspicious, just like when Frozenleaf was questioning me! You-You're just like *them!"*

"Excuse me?" Hawkscar snapped incredulously. "Spottedpaw, I am *worried* about you. You know that I just want to protect you. You need to tell me if there is any reason for her to suspect you're breaking the code. If some cat, *especially* someone like Frozenleaf, starts getting the wrong idea, they could tell Deadeye and you could end up hurt or worse." Even though he was growing agitated alongside his apprentice, he remained in his relaxed position.

"Dead like Shadestar?" Spottedpaw blurted and swiped at a

nearby leaf. Within an instant Hawkscar was on his paws and Spottedpaw realized what she had just said. The molly shrank away from her mentor, suddenly wishing that he would forget everything that she said.

"Where did you hear that name?" There was nothing accusatory in his tone; only concern and urgency were present. Spottedpaw felt her fur heat up again, and she scuffed her paws at the ground uncomfortably.

"W-Well sometimes, you know, Molestrike would tell us these crazy stories—"

"Don't give me that. What you said is something Deadeye allows no apprentice to know. He forbids even the elders from mentioning that, so explain, please," Hawkscar urged, his tail tip twitching quickly. Spottedpaw gave a sigh and looked away, realizing that she didn't have a way out of this mess.

"That, um . . . that's what my dreams have been about," she admitted quietly, desperately trying to ignore the pit that had formed in her stomach. "I figured he was just some figment of my imagination, but he keeps coming back and mentioning things like StarClan and fixing what the Gorge has caused. I don't understand any of it, but it– it just won't *stop."* Spottedpaw let her head and tail droop; she expected Hawkscar to take her straight to Deadeye and tell him about what she just revealed.

A heavy silence fell over the duo, and Spottedpaw's panic slowly ebbed away. After what felt like forever, she peeked up at her mentor just to see that, for the first time since she met him, he looked genuinely shocked. When their eyes locked, he regained his usual warm yet unreadable composure. The tom held her gaze for a moment before extending a paw in a friendly manner.

"Come with me," he murmured and straightened his fur out. "There's something I should have taught you about a long time ago."

Hawkscar turned and led Spottedpaw through the forest once more. Moonlight dappled their pelts as they padded through the

pools of light that littered the forest floor. A gentle breeze danced its way through the trees and ruffled Spottedpaw's fur, calming her fried nerves. As they traveled, she noticed the scent markers that marked the far end of their territory and finally realized where they were.

She knew that Boulderdrop was not far behind them now. Beyond these borders would lie the dangerous Twoleg nests that the elder warriors warned her about. Spottedpaw had never seen a Twoleg before, but all the other cats told her they were ugly, pink-faced animals that walked on two legs and bore colorful pelts. They somehow lived with dogs and even some cats—the warriors called these cats *"kittypets,"* though.

Every time Spottedpaw had come to this border for a patrol, the warriors had ushered her along quickly as if even they didn't want to be there. This time, Hawkscar led her right along the borderline at a leisurely pace. After a short while of walking, she heard the crashing of the river that lined the bottom of their territory, and she could see the cliff edge through the trees.

Her mentor led her up to the very edges of the cliff. Hawkscar sat and beckoned for her to join him, his eyes welcoming. The moon lit up the entire edge of the cliff while the stars twinkled, as if greeting the two cats. Spottedpaw sat near her mentor hesitantly and peeked over the edge. When her Hawkscar tapped her shoulder with his tail, she looked up curiously.

"Do you see how the stars litter the sky?" he murmured to her and turned to face the starry sky. Spottedpaw thought of how it looked like a cat's pelt spread out above them. "That's Silverpelt. All of our ancestors, and all the ancestors of the other Clans, reside up there once they pass. It's said that in StarClan, there are no more borders—cats of different Clans exist freely among each other. Few cats visit StarClan before they die, though. Leaders, of course, visit StarClan to receive their nine lives, and medicine cats visit a sacred place called Starfalls every half moon to share tongues with the ancestors. They're always watching over us, and if it's needed, they can deliver prophecies to help warn and protect the Clans from destruction. They even watch over Tallrock during Gatherings, and if they're displeased by our behavior, they'll send clouds to cover

the moon." Hawkscar briefly turned his head downward toward the roaring river far below them.

"A long, long time ago, our name was MistClan. We were once one of the five Clans, but a past leader decided that we no longer needed StarClan. He devised a wretched plan that caused a massive war between all the Clans—we call it the Great Rift, and once the war was over, we rebranded as the Gorge, and the leader outlawed any and all talk of StarClan. Our new code doesn't even allow our healers to visit their sacred spot with the Clans' medicine cats. They're still expected to communicate to StarClan, but for seasons our ancestors have been silent. Many cats from other Clans left to join us, believing that it would protect them from harm if more wars began. This meant breaking away from their home Clans, and from StarClan."

When Hawkscar paused, Spottedpaw glanced at him. She struggled to understand what this meant for her if he spoke the truth. Her dreams could still be meaningless, right? Some ancient dead cat had no reason to contact her when Frozenleaf and Deadeye had been searching for the slightest bit of communication.

"When Deadeye ascended to leadership, our rules only got stricter. If he suspects someone of believing in StarClan, I'm certain he would exile or kill them. Somehow, even though we've shut out StarClan for seasons—and they've shut us out as well—they've managed to get through to *you,* Spottedpaw."

Once she fully registered what he'd said, Spottedpaw stared incredulously at her mentor. The possibility of what the tom suggested shook her to her core. Exactly why Shadestar had started invading her dreams of all cats, she didn't think that she would ever understand; she wasn't entirely certain that she wanted to understand, either.

Her mind reeled at the confirmation of StarClan's existence. She turned her gaze back up towards the stars once more, watching them twinkle at her. *So all of my—all of* our *ancestors are really up there? It isn't some stupid nursery tale, after all.* After some pondering, she wondered how StarClan could just cut off contact—and somehow still contact her. Her mentor interrupted her thoughts,

demanding her attention.

"Listen closely—under no circumstances can you tell any cat about this, understood? I know you might trust some cats like Nightpaw or Riverpaw, but this is serious. It would jeopardize your safety if any cat found out about this." When Hawkscar fixed a dead-serious gaze on her, all she could do was nod. She had so many questions, but thought better of it when she noticed that he'd started to glance at the trees nervously.

"Hawkscar, did I do alright with that training exercise?" She changed the subject when she, too, grew paranoid. Her mentor merely nodded and waved his tail.

"It's getting late," the cream tom muttered with a final sideways glance at the treeline. "Come on, it's time we get back to camp." He didn't have to say it, but Spottedpaw knew exactly what he meant. She constantly felt like some cat was watching her. The feeling wasn't exclusive to the Gathering, either; she felt it when she went for a walk with Jayleaf, when she had her incident in the training den, and even now. If some cat had eavesdropped on them tonight, she knew that it could ruin her life.

Chapter 10

[image]

Wind swayed the trees gently, the leaves whispering as they rustled against one another. Spottedpaw panted heavily as she sparred with her friend, Nightpaw. Around her she could hear several other apprentices scuffling as they sparred with one another; Dustpaw with Pearlpaw, Riverpaw with Rabbitpaw. Off to the side of the training clearing, Rocksplash watched them with a judgmental glint in her eyes. While it was nothing new for the warrior, it still unsettled Spottedpaw.

Spottedpaw cast a brief glance toward the tortoiseshell warrior. Next to her sat Mudwing, and it looked as though he was desperately trying to strike up some sort of conversation with the stony-faced she-cat.

“Pay attention to the apprentices,” Spottedpaw heard the she-cat mutter. Mudwing grew visibly uncomfortable as he fell silent. The apprentice felt a pang of sympathy for him; she knew she wouldn’t want to keep someone as cold as Rocksplash company.

A brief swipe over her ear brought her attention back to her sparring partner. Spottedpaw held back a hiss as her ear stung from the contact and turned on her friend playfully. She studied her temporary foe and saw an opening to the right, where Nightpaw’s hind-leg stuck out like a sore paw. When Spottedpaw reached out to topple her friend, the grey-speckled she-cat swiped at her flank.

Spottedpaw leapt back in surprise, not ready to lose their training match quite yet. She and Nightpaw circled each other slowly, and as they did so Spottedpaw felt a flame slowly ignite within her. Ordinarily she would think it was just the *“thrill of battle”* that all the warriors spoke about, but at the battle at the border she’d felt nothing like this. For the first time in several sunrises, she felt light on her paws—even though the weight of the previous night’s events still hung over her shoulders.

Her gaze met Nightpaw's momentarily; there was an unusual twinkle in her friend's amber eyes, though Spottedpaw dismissed it as mere playfulness. The more they trained, the more Spottedpaw grew accustomed to Nightpaw's strengths, all the while identifying her weaknesses. *She may be swift and cunning, but she doesn't have the endurance to keep it up for long,* Spottedpaw mused, careful not to let her expression betray her thoughts.

"Come on, already," Nightpaw hissed excitedly. Spottedpaw couldn't suppress her amusement as she realized that her friend also lacked patience. Without a word, the golden-spotted she-cat darted forward and nipped at Nightpaw's tail in an attempt to taunt her. Nightpaw narrowed her eyes and lashed her paw out in retaliation; Spottedpaw hopped out of the way gracefully, each movement meant to further tease and taunt her friend. It took all of her strength to keep her pride down when she saw Nightpaw only grow more restless. The grey she-cat swiped at Spottedpaw relentlessly, each swipe growing more desperate than the last when not a single one landed.

By the time Nightpaw finally landed a shot, Spottedpaw could see that she was growing tired. A paw barely grazed along Spottedpaw's shoulder, and Nightpaw let out a triumphant laugh. Spottedpaw couldn't help a twinge of satisfaction she felt as she took advantage of the opportunity. The golden apprentice lunged forward, knocking Nightpaw right off of her paws. Spottedpaw launched her fellow apprentice back and pinned her against the dusty forest floor.

Spottedpaw purred triumphantly, happy to have finally won against Nightpaw. She was even happier that there had been no strange visions interrupting her, no reminders of just how terrifying Deadeye could be. The pride that welled up inside her chest came to a halt when she noticed that the other apprentices had stopped to watch them. Spottedpaw slowly turned her gaze to the two mentors. Both of the warriors had fixated their now-curious stares on Spottedpaw and Nightpaw. Suddenly, she was aware of a near-suffocating silence that had fallen on the clearing.

"Did I uh . . . do something wrong?" Spottedpaw asked hesitantly, letting Nightpaw scramble to her paws. Her friend shook

the dust out of her fur and shot her an amazed look.

“No way—you were so cool! I didn’t even realize what was happening until you had me pinned,” she laughed affectionately. Rocksplash rose to her paws and padded forward.

“Interesting tactic, Spottedpaw,” the warrior murmured. “You considered her strengths, which would be her speed and her quick-thinking, and pitted her right against her biggest weakness: endurance. It was almost impressive—especially considering the progress of the other apprentices. A single wrong step for you would have cost you that victory.” The she-cat nearly sounded like she was praising Spottedpaw; so much so that Dustpaw had started scowling at his sister. Spottedpaw felt her cheeks and ears flush with embarrassment, especially when Mudwing voiced his agreement.

“Hawkscar has definitely been training you well,” the black-and-white tom purred. “Nightpaw, you could learn from this.” Nightpaw nodded eagerly as the rest of the apprentices approached them. Rocksplash scanned the gathered apprentices, her gaze resting on Dustpaw momentarily.

“That’ll be enough training for the day. Let’s return to the cave; there are patrols to attend to, and I’m sure the rest of the mentors would like to know your progress.”

The two warriors led them away from the clearing and back to the camp. Spottedpaw eagerly fell into step between Nightpaw and Riverpaw, thankful that there was a distance between the trio and Dustpaw. As much as she wanted to keep her distance, Spottedpaw couldn’t help straining to hear what the surrounding cats talked about.

“I bet Nightpaw just threw that so that Spottedpaw would win,” Dustpaw muttered bitterly to Pearlpaw. His voice was so soft that Spottedpaw could barely hear him.

“Don’t talk about my sister like that,” Pearlpaw snapped. She heard Dustpaw give a grunt and could only assume that he’d received a harsh shove from the pale she-cat.

“Whatever,” the tom scoffed. “I bet I would have beat Spottedpaw right into the earth if it were me. She’s not that good.” Pearlpaw let out an amused cackle at that, quieting down to a snicker when Rocksplash shot her a glowering look.

“You’re just jealous that your mentor would praise her instead of you,” Pearlpaw teased. Spottedpaw shook her head gently to pull her own attention away from the conversation. If Dustpaw wanted to talk about her behind her back, who was she to stop him? The she-cat couldn’t fault him for how he felt. She turned her gaze to Nightpaw and nudged her friend gently.

“Where’s Brownpaw at?” she asked quietly. She’d noticed Rabbitpaw walking by himself at the edge of the crowd of apprentices. The dark ginger tom appeared to be caught up in his thoughts as they padded through the forest, a concerned expression resting on his face. Usually, he’d be walking alongside Brownpaw, playing with his brother as they carried on.

“He’s still *really* afraid of leaving the caves.” Nightpaw winced visibly at the mention of her brother. “He hasn’t left the caves since his accident, and I think Deadeye is losing his patience.” Spottedpaw felt her heart drop to her stomach when Nightpaw said that. The one-eyed leader had shown time and time again that nothing good came from his lack of patience.

“Well, is there anything we can do? You know, to help coax him out?”

“I think he has to do this on his own.” Nightpaw shook her head before changing the subject. “What about Fernpaw? I haven’t seen your sister train with us in a few sunrises.” It was Spottedpaw’s turn to wince at the mention of a sibling.

“She’s been hanging out with Shortpaw a lot lately,” Spottedpaw responded hesitantly, thinking of a way out of the conversation. She couldn’t help lighting up when she thought of her late-night lesson with Hawkscar. “Lately she’s helping him gather herbs or tend to Molestrike. Frozenleaf doesn’t seem to help much—enough about that, though. You know how I’ve been having those awful dreams? And– and those weird episodes, like what happened in the training

cave?"

Nightpaw shot Spottedpaw a glance, her eyes twinkling with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "What about them? They aren't getting worse, are they?" Spottedpaw glanced around and lowered her voice.

"No, not at all. Actually, I think they're not just nightmares, if you get what I mean." When Nightpaw only looked at her in confusion, Spottedpaw held back an amused eye-roll. "I think they're a message."

"You mean like an omen?" Nightpaw blurted out. When Spottedpaw nudged her harshly, she whispered, "But isn't all that stuff fake? You know, the omens and visions and all of that stuff? All the warriors say so." Spottedpaw glanced around to make sure nobody was listening.

"I guess it's kind of like an omen. I can't say much about it now, but I'll tell you more when I have a chance—as long as you promise to keep it a secret." When Nightpaw nodded earnestly, Spottedpaw purred and picked up the pace behind the warriors ahead of them. *I can't wait to tell her about my dreams,* she thought excitedly. *And about StarClan! She'll be mind-blown.* Hawkscar's repeated warnings to Spottedpaw had blown away with the wind. She ignored any feelings of foreboding, readily embracing the idea of confiding in her friend.

Once they returned to the cave, Rocksplash immediately stalked off to report to the rest of the mentors. With a glance around the cave, Spottedpaw glimpsed Fernpaw disappearing into the medicine den. She rolled her eyes in exasperation. *Why is she hanging out with the healers, anyway?* she wondered. *I hope Coldstep doesn't think she's shirking her apprentice duties.*

"You can all go pick something from the fresh-kill pile," Mudwing nodded to the apprentices and padded off to sit with the other warriors. Spottedpaw glanced at her friends; Nightpaw had already left with Dustpaw and Pearlpaw, with Riverpaw tagging along awkwardly. She gave a shrug and padded toward the fresh-kill pile.

As she crossed the cave, she spotted Clawtail standing below the Smoothstone and realized that the regent must be organizing the rest of the day's patrols. Not too far off sat Hawkscar, the cream-striped tom cleaning himself casually. Spottedpaw didn't let herself get fooled by his relaxed demeanor; the tom's ears were perked, and she knew he was listening to everything that happened in the caves.

Mudwing sat next to her mentor with a couple of mice at his paws. Spottedpaw picked a fat robin from the pile of prey and hesitantly approached the two warriors. Before she could even utter a greeting, Hawkscar turned to face his apprentice. His dark amber eyes gleamed with pride.

"I heard that you almost got Rocksplash to praise you today," he teased the golden-furred she-cat, who looked away sheepishly in response. "Really, though, it sounds like you did well. I'm proud of you, Spottedpaw." Even though her ears heated up in embarrassment, she felt a bit of pride well up in her chest.

"It was really nothing," Spottedpaw murmured and dipped her head. "If Nightpaw hadn't beaten me so much, I never would've known to do that. She's *fantastic* at close combat." She nodded to her friend's mentor, who merely chuckled in response. The apprentice sat near her mentor and ate the robin. She cast her attention to their regent, watching curiously as she sorted patrols out.

"Rocksplash, Dustpaw, Finclaw, and Redflight, you'll be going on the sunhigh border patrol. Foxleap and Thornheart, you'll take your apprentices to go hunting. Ironheart, you'll lead the sunset patrol with Fireclaw and Riverpaw." The named cats nodded and gathered to prepare for their patrol as Clawtail droned on, listing off cats' names.

At the edge of the cave, a flash of brown caught Spottedpaw's attention. She turned her gaze and noticed Brownpaw shuffling around awkwardly next to Rabbitpaw. The two toms seemed to deep in a rather serious conversation—Brownpaw twitched his tail tip anxiously while Rabbitpaw looked uncertain. The apprentice shrugged off their behavior and continued to eat her meal, remembering how Brownpaw had grown more nervous since the

fall.

By the time she finished, Clawtail had finally finished announcing the patrol schedule. It took nearly all of Spottedpaw's willpower to not let out a sigh of relief when she didn't get called for any patrols. After an exhausting couple of sunrises, she felt all too happy to have a night off.

"I'd like every cat's attention before you attend to your duties." Deadeye's voice startled the apprentice and those around her as he emerged from his den. She shifted her attention to their slender leader, curious about what was happening. Even Clawtail seemed surprised, the stocky she-cat's eyes widening.

"Are you not going to call a Clan meeting?" she whispered to him—she might as well have shouted it for how quiet the cave had grown.

"Goodness, no," Deadeye let out a silvery yet insincere laugh. "It's nothing dire enough for a Clan meeting. I just found this to be a marvellous opportunity to prepare my esteemed campmates, what with all the warriors and apprentices present for patrol assignments." He gave a nod to the cats who'd been preparing for their daily duties.

Spottedpaw glanced at her mentor for a hint at what was going on, but he looked just as lost as she felt. Once more she gave Deadeye her attention; something felt off, though she couldn't place what caused the feeling. *Maybe it's just because it's Deadeye,* she told herself. *He really creeps me out, so it'd make sense.*

"I know that my lack of action against BlazeClan has concerned a few of you—" the tom sent a meaningful glance to Snowface and Frostheart, "—and it's rather understandable. A death as unprovoked as Jaggedthorn deserves immediate vengeance. Worry no longer, my dear warriors and future warriors. Soon, I will have devised a plan to ensure us victory—and a decent amount of territory, too. All I ask of you is to be patient and prepared." The abrupt announcement seemed to have lifted the spirits of the cats around Spottedpaw.

Murmurs of satisfaction spread among the gathered warriors. Spottedpaw dared an uneasy glance at her mentor and saw that while he appeared just as calm as ever, Mudwing had shifted uneasily next to him. Somehow, she felt relieved that not all the warriors were eager for war.

The cats in the main cave dispersed into groups to prepare for their patrols. Those who weren't assigned a patrol, like Spottedpaw, took the chance to relax. Deadeye spoke in a hushed tone to Clawtail, and for once Spottedpaw buried her desire to hear the conversation.

"U-Um, Clawtail?" A soft voice spoke up, and Brownpaw stepped forward hesitantly with Rabbitpaw close behind him. Deadeye, who'd remained next to Clawtail, turned toward the two apprentices curiously. Brownpaw opened his mouth to speak again, but no sound came out.

"He wants to know if you'd allow him to . . . er . . . skip his patrol," Rabbitpaw spoke up for his brother hesitantly. The two toms were visibly trembling under the attention of both Clawtail and Deadeye. A flash of grey across the cave caught her attention, and when she looked closer, she noticed Nightpaw moving closer to the four cats. The speckled she-cat looked horrified by her brother's request.

"Skip a patrol? Is he somehow unable to take part?" Deadeye spoke up before Clawtail could respond. His tone was that of mockery—though it was so slight that Spottedpaw hardly noticed. When Brownpaw didn't respond right away, their leader grew visibly angry.

"N-No, sir," Brownpaw stammered when Deadeye dug his claws into the stony floor. "I-It's just that, well, ever since I fell at Boulderdrop, I've had this awful feeling that it might happen again."

"You have an *awful feeling?"* Deadeye's tone was more mocking than ever, his voice nearly dripping with sarcasm. "What are you, some defenseless kit?" Deadeye took a few threatening steps toward Brownpaw, only stopping when Clawtail stepped in front of him.

Spottedpaw felt her blood run cold as she remembered her chilling incident once more. *Something's not right here,* she thought as she watched the argument unfold. *The warriors can't be okay with this, can they?*

As usual, her mentor's expression revealed nothing to her. Hawkscar watched their leader confront Brownpaw, his gaze as stony as ever. Clawtail murmured something to Deadeye as Brownpaw trembled more than ever. Rabbitpaw looked just as terrified, as did Nightpaw, who'd inched closer to the group.

"You will go on this patrol if it's the last thing you do," Deadeye leaned in and growled to the apprentice. Spottedpaw leaned forward anxiously, noticing the same unsettling glint in his good eye that she'd seen many times before. She knew something was wrong here—perhaps his isolation from StarClan was making him behave like this. Even with that theory, she couldn't grasp why the warriors would allow it to happen.

"Y-Yes, Deadeye." Brownpaw slunk away with Rabbitpaw, meeting with their mentors near the entrance of the cave. Spottedpaw noticed that Thornheart watched her apprentice closely, her usually dull eyes narrowed in anger. She ignored a foreboding feeling growing within her and rose to her paws, padding across the cave to meet her friend.

Nightpaw hadn't moved from her position. The grey-speckled she-cat eyed her brothers and their mentors, her gaze lingering on Thornheart for a few moments. Spottedpaw watched her friend curiously, wondering if Nightpaw started picking up on the same things as her. At first, she considered asking the apprentice, though she quickly decided against it.

"Do you wanna hear about that secret, Nightpaw?" she asked quietly. Spottedpaw knew that the she-cat already worried enough about her siblings and thought maybe this would take her mind off of it.

"Oh, sure! Most of the other apprentices are preparing for patrols, so our den will be free," Nightpaw chirped, her previously grim gaze now bright. Spottedpaw felt relieved at her friend's

cheeriness, glad to have distracted her, at least for a while. The two apprentices padded to their den and, after making sure that they were alone, they spoke to each other in hushed tones.

"So in my dreams," Spottedpaw began, her voice barely a whisper, "there's always this cat—he's called Shadestar. He told me that we used to be one of the Clans, and that we were called MistClan! At first I thought I was crazy, but then the elders mentioned cats that were named in these dreams, something just felt . . . weird." She didn't mention her lesson with Hawkscar just yet, suddenly unsure of how much she wanted to reveal. His warnings to her came to mind, and as she spoke Spottedpaw felt like she had made a poor choice.

"No way!" Nightpaw breathed. "Are you sure you aren't just having nightmares from the elders' tales?"

"Absolutely," Spottedpaw nodded quickly. "Nightpaw, I have had visions. And I know StarClan is real, because I overheard Deadeye and Frozenleaf talking about them! They can't contact StarClan, but for some reason, StarClan contacted me. They've given me visions and messages—telling me to pursue serenity, to claim my *'golden dawn,'* whatever that means."

Nightpaw only stared at her, appalled. Spottedpaw shifted a bit in her spot, wondering if she made the wrong decision by confiding in Nightpaw. *She wouldn't tell anyone,* the golden she-cat reassured herself. The silence carried on until Spottedpaw felt nearly suffocated by it. Right when she opened her mouth to speak again, Nightpaw spoke up.

"Spottedpaw," she whispered. "Do you realize how big this is if this is true? You could be the next Deadeye!"

"I could," Spottedpaw agreed and forced herself not to grimace at the thought. "But the warriors all act like StarClan is fake, and so does Deadeye, so we have to keep this a secret, okay?" When Nightpaw nodded excitedly, Spottedpaw felt waves of relief wash over her. There was no way her friend would let her secret slip.

The two she-cats continued to sit next to one another, each

growing more comfortable with the others' presence. Every so often they'd share a joke or two, or poke fun at the other's littermates. Spottedpaw knew it was all in good jest and laughed alongside her friend.

"Fernpaw is drawing attention with how much she's hanging with Shortpaw," Nightpaw teased. "Pearlpaw thinks she's developed a little crush, you know."

"I'm starting to wonder, myself," Spottedpaw snorted as she thought of her sister. "I don't understand it, but it isn't my place to question her. What about Pearlpaw, though? She's stuck by Dustpaw's side ever since your apprenticeship started!"

"Oh no, that's all Dustpaw," Nightpaw burst out laughing. "He won't leave her be—he's almost as bad as Thornheart and Redflight!"

"They're almost like some evil villain couple from the nursery tales, when you think about it," Spottedpaw snickered playfully. "Dustpaw is so cold and menacing—at least, he tries to be. And Pearlpaw is so calculating and just as cold!" Nightpaw visibly tried to refrain from laughing at the comparison, but eventually she gave in as her cackling shook her body.

The two apprentices laughed together until sunset. Spottedpaw's growling stomach reminded her of how late it was, so they exited the apprentices' den to fetch some prey from the fresh-kill pile. As they were picking up their meals, Rabbitpaw rushed into the cave, his eyes wide.

"Help!" he blurted out. "Brownpaw fell just outside the cave—he's gonna fall into the river!" There was a soft thud next to Spottedpaw, and when she glanced at the noise, she saw that Nightpaw had dropped her prey. The she-cat's eyes were wide with horror and her body stiff. Spottedpaw dropped her own prey as Clawtail rushed to Rabbitpaw, nudging him away from the cave entrance. The warriors emerged from their dens, though not a single cat moved to help Brownpaw.

An unsettling stillness fell upon those in the cave. Spottedpaw

knew she should panic, but somehow she felt calm. If Brownpaw fell down into the river, he surely wouldn't make it. If she, a mere apprentice, knew this, then the warriors definitely knew as well. She remained still, wondering why no capable warriors were moving to help. Movement next to Spottedpaw caught her attention once more, and she noticed Nightpaw start rushing toward the cave entrance.

"What are you doing?" she called. Spottedpaw couldn't shake this weird feeling that had fallen upon her. Should she be helping?

"I'm going to help my brother," Nightpaw hissed over her shoulder and disappeared through the main entrance. Before Spottedpaw knew what she was doing, her paws carried her after Nightpaw. She forced her way through the main entrance, freezing when she finally reached the ledges just outside of the camp.

Spottedpaw's calmness faded as she remembered how many times she'd teetered on the edges of these cliffs. The fall below was steep, and the river roared threateningly far below them; she felt certain no cat could survive a fall like that. The apprentice noticed Nightpaw peeking over the edge and copied her, gasping when she saw Brownpaw on a smaller, weaker ledge beneath them. Dread finally made its way into Spottedpaw's heart as she realized how bad the situation was.

"Stay calm, Brownpaw!" Nightpaw called. "I'll help you!"

"And don't move!" Spottedpaw blurted out when she noticed the ledge crumbling beneath his paws. She glanced to the side and saw Foxleap sitting at the treeline, a worried expression on her mother's face. Thornheart was a few tail lengths away from Nightpaw on the ledge, leaning over to watch her apprentice.

"Brownpaw, listen to me," she ordered. "You're going to have to jump to me. I'll catch you by your scruff and get you to safety." Spottedpaw blinked in amazement. The ledge beneath Brownpaw was wearing away quickly. It would give out under the wrong amount of pressure. *Is she insane?* she wondered incredulously.

"Brownpaw, don't!" Spottedpaw called. "The ledge beneath you

is weak, it'll give out if you ju—"

"Silence, apprentice," Thornheart snapped. "Jump now, Brownpaw. Trust me." Spottedpaw felt her heart leap to her throat when the pale brown tom prepared to jump. When he launched himself, the ledge beneath him fell apart, causing his jump to falter. Spottedpaw forced her way forward quickly, pushing Nightpaw away from the ledge in the process—shoving her away from what she was about to witness.

Brownpaw's claws scraped at the edges of the cliff side. Thornheart shot forward, her jaws snapping shut on open air when she missed the apprentice's scruff. Spottedpaw tried launching her paw out in an attempt to help, but she only swiped at thin air. Brownpaw let out an ear-splitting wail as he plummeted—alongside Spottedpaw's heart. She forced herself to look away from the falling apprentice, though she could not deafen herself to his cries. His wails grew fainter and fainter until they suddenly got cut off, and she knew that he had hit the river.

Behind her, Nightpaw trembled violently. Spottedpaw refused to open her eyes, feeling as though the scene would only replay if she did so. Her stomach lurched at the thought of hitting the surface of the water—even if Brownpaw survived the initial impact, he'd surely drown. With all that happened, Spottedpaw felt trapped once more; she felt surrounded by tragedy and treachery. With each passing sunrise something else happened that further changed her outlook on life, and on the Gorge itself.

Chapter 11

The camp had been quiet ever since that horrifying day. No cat was permitted to hold a vigil for Brownpaw under Deadeye's order; the one-eyed leader decided that the apprentice had behaved too cowardly to deserve a vigil. Several sunrises had passed since his death, and Spottedpaw couldn't banish the memories of what she'd witnessed.

Spottedpaw let out a gentle sigh as she rested by Nightpaw's side. Ironheart sat on the other side of her kit, their heads lowered together. Most of the warriors remained busy by going about their duties, and every so often Mudwing would come by to check on Nightpaw. Even though Deadeye frowned upon their mourning, the black-and-white warrior promised to give Nightpaw time to recover; the apprentice had hardly spoken a word since she lost her brother.

The golden apprentice turned away from her friend for a heartbeat, scanning the cold, dark cave warily. Every so often she would get the telltale prickling sensation in her fur, as if some cat had her in their sights. While few cats criticized the family for mourning, Deadeye hadn't caught them yet and Spottedpaw preferred to keep it that way.

Oddly enough, Deadeye had hardly left his own den since the incident. Spottedpaw felt uneasy in his absence; an inexplicable sense of dread loomed over her head when she wondered what he might be up to. She tried blaming it on her dreamless nights, as she hadn't had many coherent dreams ever since she found out that StarClan truly existed—if anything, Brownpaw's death left her with new, mind-spinning nightmares that never made much sense. The excuse did little to ease her feelings, though.

When Spottedpaw's gaze met Pearlpaw's striking green eyes, she grew uncomfortable. *How long has she been staring at me? What does she want?* she wondered suspiciously. The pale tabby seemed incredibly focused on Spottedpaw, and when they locked gazes, her

curious expression turned into a mocking glare—a glare that threatened her. Spottedpaw's skin crawled under her intense stare. Something about the look on Pearlpaw's face made worry sprout within the golden-furred apprentice.

"Do you think he's not scared anymore? If StarClan really exists, like you said." Nightpaw's whisper startled her from her thoughts. Spottedpaw pressed against her friend gently and turned back to her.

"Yeah," she hummed without a moment of hesitation. "I think he's really happy now, Nightpaw. And if I ever visit those StarClan cats again, I'll be sure to find him and tell him you sent me." While her friend appeared to appreciate that, Spottedpaw couldn't shake the worry that stuck to her. She did her best to ignore it and let her mind wander while she sat peacefully with her friend.

Movement across the cave caught the attention of the apprentices, while Ironheart remained with her head lowered solemnly. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise when Molestrike emerged from the elders' den, her eyes glossy from the sickness she suffered. The light brown molly stumbled, her paws scuffing noisily on the floor of the cave and drawing more attention to herself.

Spottedpaw glanced off to the side when she noticed, once again, three curious sets of eyes peeking out of the nursery. She held back an amused chuckle when the three kits tumbled out of the den, tripping over one another as they did so. Watching them reminded her of her own time in the nursery; her siblings never used to play like that with her, but the memories of it still felt crisp in her mind. Spottedpaw wondered if Deadeye's kits knew what had happened with Brownpaw. *What a stupid thought,* she scolded herself. *If he isn't letting us mourn him, why would he tell his own kits about it?* The three kits continued to tumble around and the distance between them and the elder decreased.

Molestrike suddenly burst into a coughing fit when Sunkit tumbled at her paws. Spottedpaw jumped to her paws anxiously when the kit gave a yelp of surprise before scurrying back to her littermates. As Molestrike continued hacking painfully—no, she was practically choking—cats turned their attention to her. After a few

uncomfortable moments of witnessing the elder suffer, Spottedpaw realized that none of the warriors planned on fetching the healers for help. Right as she moved to fetch Frozenleaf, the small, snowy-white she-cat rushed out of the medicine den with Shortpaw limping behind her.

For the first time, Spottedpaw realized that despite his permanent injury, Shortpaw's broken foot hardly slowed him down; he even applied poultices and mixed medicines with little trouble. A flash of ginger behind them caught her eye, and the apprentice narrowed her eyes when she noticed Fernpaw emerging from the medicine den behind them. Her sister insisted on neglecting her own apprentice duties so that she could help out the healers, though it was clear that she had no interest in healing.

"Everyone get back," Frozenleaf ordered as she approached the elder. When she saw Fernpaw sit a few fox-lengths away from the healers, Spottedpaw padded towards her sister. With a glance backward, she saw that Nightpaw had risen to her paws and started following her wordlessly.

"Frozenleaf, you know we're out of catmint," Shortpaw whispered, though from Spottedpaw's position, he was just barely audible. She leaned forward worriedly as Molestrike's coughing worsened by the heartbeat. It was clear that both of the healers were just as concerned as she felt, if not moreso.

"Oh, for the love of StarClan," Frozenleaf muttered under her breath—at least, that's what Spottedpaw *thought* she heard. No cat around her responded to it, as if nobody else had heard it. "There should be honey in the storage—there isn't much, but it might help. We just have to stop her coughing for now. Bring some tansy too, if we have any."

When Shortpaw rushed to the healers' den, Spottedpaw focused on Frozenleaf. The molly looked distressed at the state of the elder; though her coughing had calmed down slightly, Molestrike still couldn't stop to get a breath. Spottedpaw took a few steps forward and prepared to offer her assistance, but the healer quickly silenced her.

"Stay back," Frozenleaf ordered. "The last thing we need is all of the apprentices getting sick. That goes for all of you, as well," she added and shot a dirty look at some of the lingering warriors. "If you aren't doing anything useful, get lost." After a few tense moments, Shortpaw returned with a mouthful of herbs and honey. Frozenleaf gave him an exasperated look when she saw him.

"I found the honey and tansy just like you asked," Shortpaw reported and dropped the herbs at Frozenleaf's paws. "We don't have much tansy, so I grabbed the lovage and bright-eye just in case." The healer merely nodded, and together the two cats worked to help Molestrike stop coughing.

"He's so cool," Fernpaw breathed from beside Spottedpaw. "I wonder when he'll get his full name. Redflight's his brother, and he's had his name for moons!" Spottedpaw shot her sister a look but said nothing; it wasn't wrong to admire the healer, even though it was clearly interfering with her duties. *Should I say something to her about it?* she asked herself. *It isn't like she's breaking any rules . . . .* She watched as Shortpaw mixed the herbs he'd carried out while Frozenleaf tried to calm Molestrike's coughing, trying to understand her sister's admiration of the tom.

"There we go," Frozenleaf murmured in relief when Molestrike's choking ceased. The frail molly's chest heaved as she gasped for air, her legs crumpling beneath her. "Careful, Molestrike. Eat this, and then we'll get you to the medicine den so we can keep a close eye on you." Shortpaw coaxed Molestrike into eating the medicine that he mixed, and once she ate it, he helped her to her paws. The two healers helped the elder to the medicine den, and Spottedpaw and the two apprentices with her backed out of their way.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Spottedpaw turned around when she heard Deadeye's kits whisper amongst themselves. Sunkit had her eyes focused on the den that the healers had vanished into, while Blackkit and Dapplekit gave each other uneasy glances. Spottedpaw tried not to wince as she felt a pang of sympathy for the kits.

"Of course she'll be okay," Spottedpaw assured them softly. "We have the best healers in the entire forest, you know. There's not a thing to worry about. Right, Fernpaw?" She nudged her sister

gently, urging her to chime in.

"Yeah!" Fernpaw chirped and padded up to the kits. She swished her fluffy tail and hung it over Sunkit's shoulders reassuringly. "I've gotten to watch them pretty closely the last few sunrises, and they're amazing at what they do."

"If you say so," Blackkit mumbled slowly, though he trailed off as he succumbed to a short coughing fit. Fernpaw and Spottedpaw immediately exchanged worried glances; even though this would be their first leaf-bare, the sound of Molestrike's cough had become all too familiar. Spottedpaw spun around to rush to the healers' den. As she hurried off, she saw Nightpaw take her spot and comfort the kits. *How come we're doing more to help than the warriors do?* Spottedpaw wondered to herself. *Hawkscar sometimes vanishes to do his own weird things, but it seems like the rest of the warriors don't care about anyone else!*

"Frozenleaf," she gasped as she burst into the medicine den. The white-furred molly turned on Spottedpaw within an instant, her icy-blue gaze reaching through her soul. For a heartbeat, that gaze reminded Spottedpaw of her most vivid nightmare—or rather, dream—yet. She remembered the chilling stare she'd caught from across the cave and wondered, for a split second, why she felt the same intensity under Frozenleaf's intent looks.

"What is it, Spottedpaw?" the healer asked guardedly, snapping her out of her thoughts. "If you're finally ready to talk to me about those dreams, it's unfortunately a terrible time . . . though, you *could* sit over in the corner and tell me about them while I work . . . ." Though she took on a thoughtful tone, her gaze was ever-searching when faced with the apprentice.

"What? This isn't about those," Spottedpaw hissed. "It's the kits—Deadeye's kits. Blackkit started coughing, and it sounds a lot like . . . ." The apprentice trailed off when she saw Molestrike's body, her frail frame resting uncomfortably in a makeshift mossy nest. For a few moments, the elder seemed dreadfully lifeless; only the faint rise and fall of her chest as she breathed soothed Spottedpaw's fear.

"What? That can't be. Shortpaw, prepare all the herbs we have

while I inspect them." Within a heartbeat, Frozenleaf had shoved past Spottedpaw and into the clearing. By the time Spottedpaw exited the den, she was already corralling the kits to the medicine den.

Spottedpaw shuffled out of the way awkwardly and rushed to meet her friend and sister once again. The two apprentices sat wordlessly next to one another, and an awkward air hung between the two of them. Though she noticed it almost instantly, Spottedpaw held her tongue and sat down hesitantly.

"Do you think they have it?" Fernpaw blurted out worriedly after a few heartbeats of uncomfortable silence.

"Is that really a question?" Nightpaw murmured uneasily. "I'd like to think they're fine, but . . . ."

"You both heard how Blackkit coughed," Spottedpaw murmured. "It sounded just like Molestrike when Frozenleaf first diagnosed her, and look at her now!" She cringed when she thought of the sickly elder. Spottedpaw tilted her head when Fernpaw's gaze became fixated beyond her, and Nightpaw shuffled backwards without uttering a word.

"Talking about my children, now, Spottedpaw?" Deadeye's sickly sweet voice never failed to make her skin crawl. The slender black tom leaned over Spottedpaw's shoulder threateningly, his whiskers tickling the fur on her cheeks. "You wouldn't dare to do that behind my back, now, would you? I was so certain that your mentors had taught you better than that." Spottedpaw immediately wondered where Hawkscar could possibly be. *He's always here to get me out of these situations,* she thought as she tried to keep her panic down. In front of her, Nightpaw and Fernpaw looked too frightened to speak up.

"You misunderstand, sir," Spottedpaw responded reluctantly, forcing herself to sound respectful. "Your son started coughing, and I've just returned from fetching Frozenleaf. We were merely expressing our concerns." She resisted the urge to pull away when she felt his whiskers twitch in amusement. Nightpaw's horrified expression suggested that what Spottedpaw had said might not have

sounded as respectful as she intended it to be.

"Oh? You think my kits are sick?" Deadeye's voice sounded thick with false gratitude as he padded around the three apprentices. "Thank you so very much, Spottedpaw, for informing me of this dreadful rumor. I can assure you that my kits are as strong as I— they share my blood, after all. They would never succumb to such a silly illness. You three clearly have too much free time, though; I absolutely must have a word with your mentors regarding it."

Without another word, Deadeye headed off toward the healers' den, his tail swaying lazily behind him. Once he was out of earshot, Nightpaw let out a massive sigh of relief, while Fernpaw glanced around uneasily.

"I can't believe you didn't just roll over and grovel at his paws!" Nightpaw burst out before rambling uncontrollably. "That was amazing, and he looked so mad for a moment. It's because of what you told me, isn't it? You're bolder because of your drea— ow!"

"Shut up," Spottedpaw hissed and prodded at her friend gently. "Besides, it was nothing, really. I don't know why everyone else caters to him." She winced when she remembered that her sister hadn't left them yet.

"Because he's our leader," Fernpaw grumbled shortly. "And it's our duty to respect him, no matter what. Even if we don't agree with him, and even if we think we're being helpful." Before Spottedpaw could respond, the ginger she-cat scoffed and padded toward the apprentices' den, where a familiar pale tabby sat alone. Fernpaw sat beside Pearlpaw and immediately became engulfed in conversation, while Spottedpaw felt her earlier worry reignite.

"I have a horrible feeling about that," she murmured to Nightpaw. "I know Pearlpaw is your sister, but—"

"So what if she's my sister? Dustpaw is your brother, but we both know he only causes trouble. I've seen the looks Pearlpaw gives you," Nightpaw interrupted, nudging her friend. "She's definitely looking to start trouble with you; I don't blame you for being worried."

"Thank you, Nightpaw," Spottedpaw mumbled gratefully, sweeping her tail around her paws. "I just wish I knew where Hawkscar went off to. I feel like I messed up by talking to Deadeye like that, and he always knows just what to say."

"You got really lucky with a mentor like him," Nightpaw purred. "I know Mudwing is almost as nice as Hawkscar—I mean, he risked his own tail by allowing me to mourn with Ironheart. You and Hawkscar seem really close, though."

"Yeah, I feel like I can tell him anything," Spottedpaw confessed sheepishly. "He's almost like a father to me—not the kind of father that we know here, but the kind that I've seen in the other Clans."

"Does he know about your dreams?" The question caught Spottedpaw off guard at first. She hesitated and glanced around the camp, instinctively looking for a way out of the question. As if on cue, the sunhigh patrol returned through the camp entrance. When she spotted her mentor among the returning warriors, she shot Nightpaw an apologetic look and rushed over to him.

"Hawkscar," Spottedpaw whispered urgently when she neared him. "Can we talk for a moment?" The tom shot her a quizzical look but nodded and led her to the outskirts of the cave. To Spottedpaw's relief, the Smoothstone and medicine den could still be seen from the spot he chose.

"Did something happen?" Her mentor's confident voice eased her nerves, and she reluctantly sat down.

"Molestrike had a really bad coughing fit," Spottedpaw began, shuddering as she remembered how frail the elder looked. "And that's not the problem, she's fine, of course—as fine as she can be, at least. It's Deadeye's kits." She told Hawkscar about what had happened—the kits coughing, her suspicion that they had caught the illness, and her following interaction with the one-eyed leader.

"I wouldn't doubt that they have whitecough," Hawkscar commented casually. "Their den *is* pretty close to the elders' den; most of us saw it coming. I don't think you need to worry about how you spoke to Deadeye, though." His gaze drifted lazily over to

the medicine den. Spottedpaw followed his gaze and jumped when Deadeye stormed out of the den, his tail lashing furiously.

Spottedpaw felt her fur prick with unease when the leader launched himself atop the Smoothstone. His single eye narrowed as he scanned the cave, and even from where she sat, Spottedpaw could see his claws digging into the stone beneath him. Now more than ever, something about the leader seemed off.

"All cats old enough to eliminate their own prey, gather below the Smoothstone!" he cried out, an edge of desperation to his cry. Almost immediately, the cats of the Gorge crowded the area below the Smoothstone.

The buzz of curious whispers filled the cave, echoing off its walls as warriors and apprentices alike exchanged uncertain glances. Even Frozenleaf, who usually shut herself away in her den during Gorge meetings, sat outside the medicine den next to her apprentice. The healer fixated her gaze on their leader, her normally calm and collected expression full of unease.

"I have called you to attention today due to unforeseen circumstances. My kits have, most unfortunately, caught whitecough. However, these are my kits—and as my kits, they share *my* blood, and they are strong! I have no doubt that they will be able to fight this off with ease, and thus have decided to grant them their apprenticeship ceremonies. Clawtail, fetch them."

Spottedpaw felt her mentor stiffen next to her. When she glanced at him, she saw that even he looked taken aback by Deadeye's decision. She turned her gaze back to the Smoothstone and saw that most of the cats below him looked just as surprised. Clawtail hesitated at the command given to her, and, with an uncertain flick of her ears, shouldered her way past the healers and into the den they guarded.

The cave fell silent when a now-furious Frozenleaf shoved her way forward, her pale blue eyes dark with anger. Deadeye ignored her approach and flicked his tail tip while he scanned the cats below him.

"Deadeye, don't do this," the healer warned. "The sickness has already sapped their strength—they won't be able to handle an apprenticeship yet."

"You dare defy me, Frozenleaf?" Deadeye snarled down at her. A chilling gust of wind swept into the cave through the main entrance, ruffling the fur of everyone that gathered below him. Spottedpaw shuddered when she noticed multiple cats back up by a few mouse-lengths.

"Am I not your healer, Deadeye? When you appointed me, you put your trust in me to know what is best for the health of every cat here—including your own kits. Put your trust in me once more, believe me when I say that *they will not survive* if you continue with this." The snowy molly grew increasingly agitated when Clawtail led the three kits out of the healers' den. *He can't be serious about this,* Spottedpaw thought when she took a closer look at the kits. *Sure, they're old enough to become apprentices, but this will only spread the sickness through the camp!*

"Today," Deadeye yowled with a final glare at Frozenleaf, "we will welcome my kits among the ranks of our apprentices! Blackkit, Sunkit, Dapplekit, come forward." Spottedpaw took a few curious pawsteps forward, halting when Hawkscar cleared his throat behind her.

"Stay with me," he muttered, though his voice was gentle. He said no more than that, his gaze once again unreadable. Spottedpaw reluctantly sat down by her mentor once more, though she kept her attention focused on the cats in front of them.

"Greyheart, time and time again you have proven yourself to be one of my most trustworthy warriors. You trained Snowface well, and Finclaw is proving to be just as fine a warrior; I'd be honored to have you train one of my own. Blackkit, step forward, my son." For the first time in her life, Spottedpaw caught a glimpse of warmth in Deadeye's good eye. The smaller tom stepped forward hesitantly, his eyes glittering with uncertainty. "From this day until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Blackpaw. Greyheart will guide you as your mentor."

Spottedpaw leaned in curiously as her father stepped forward to greet the black tom. Though they didn't touch noses, Greyheart leaned forward and whispered a few words to his new apprentice. He had an unfamiliar look to his greyish eyes—something that set alight a looming uneasiness within Spottedpaw.

"Dapplekit, step forward. From this day until you earn your warrior name, you'll be known as Dapplepaw. Frostheart, during the last battle, you proved your loyalty by taking the life of the flea-ridden scum that murdered Jaggedthorn. I ask you to prove it once more by training my kit."

This time, the apprentice and mentor touched noses. Though Dapplepaw appeared to have much more strength than Blackpaw and hadn't displayed a cough yet, Spottedpaw could see that her amber eyes were glossy from the sickness. Her stomach lurched at the thought of whitecough ravaging their camp—especially after she'd seen firsthand how few supplies Frozenleaf and Shortpaw had. *There's no way they're staying in the same den as us,* she fretted. *It's already cramped enough as it is.*

"Sunkit, it's your turn, sweet kit." Though his sickeningly sweet tone sounded genuine for once, Spottedpaw couldn't hold back a cringe. "From this day until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Sunpaw. Clawtail, you are my regent, my most trusted ally. Accept my kit as your apprentice and remind me why I have trusted you so."

Clawtail stepped forward hesitantly, her surprise written clearly on her face. Sunpaw looked just as hesitant, her black-and-orange fur bristling from her own surprise. *They weren't ready,* Spottedpaw thought. *These kits are more surprised than we are right now.* She cast her gaze up to Deadeye as the cats in the camp cheered for the new apprentices. Something about their leader seemed off, she no longer had a doubt about it. His normally sleek fur now looked disheveled and dull, his tail tip twitching frantically.

"Deadeye, you *will* listen to me," Frozenleaf demanded over the cheering. "I understand that you must be worried about the whitecough, but I assure you that this will only worsen it. They need rest." The cave quickly fell silent at her words.

"Nonsense, Frozenleaf," Deadeye chuckled gently. He sounded much calmer than before, though his appearance made him look uncertain. "They'll be fine with some training. A little encouragement and they'll push through this and become the best warriors the Gorge has ever seen."

"This isn't up for discussion, Deadeye." The healer trembled furiously, as though fighting to keep her cool. "Until they recover, they will remain in my den where I can keep a close eye on them. Come on now, you three. Shortpaw will have prepared medicine by now." Frozenleaf ushered the apprentices toward her den while Deadeye watched them wordlessly. Behind the unusually warm glint in his eye now lurked something far more sinister. Spottedpaw's stomach lurched when she noticed it and once more felt a sense of dread crawl up her spine. She blinked a few times and Deadeye's expression had returned to normal; if she didn't know any better, Spottedpaw would have thought she'd been seeing things.

"Hawkscar, is he okay?" she breathed out, unable to look away from the leader. The uncertainty in her mentor's response made her heart drop.

"I . . . I don't know, Spottedpaw."

Chapter 12

Spottedpaw padded through an unfamiliar sun-dappled forest. The air shimmered with light, as though bits of stars hung in the air. Ferns unfurled and cleared a pathway for her as she traveled through the undergrowth. The surrounding trees grew so tall that she couldn't see the tops of them; beams of sunlight filtered through the leaves so easily that she wondered if the treetops existed at all.

Fresh prey-scent filled her nostrils. *This forest has to be overflowing with prey,* she thought to herself, closing her eyes and drawing in the mouth-watering scent. Spottedpaw felt oddly at peace in such foreign territory; something about it soothed her, despite the strangeness of it all. Somewhere behind her a twig snapped, and instead of panicking, Spottedpaw flicked an ear and kept following the path that the forest led her on. She glanced down at the earthy forest floor and noticed that each pawstep she took left a shimmery trail behind her, while the path ahead of her held a soft glimmer.

Spottedpaw gave a pleasant sigh as the path opened up and the sunlight hit her fur directly. The forest seemed to carry on endlessly, stretching so far that she could only see trees upon trees. The sunlight that reflected off of the leaves and ferns called to her, leading her further into the depths of the woodland. She gave a soft hum of surprise when a couple of birds flitted across the path in front of her and ignored her desire to chase after them. When she took a closer look, she recognized the dark sheen of a swallow; the other was unmistakably a blue jay. *Even the birds here are friendly,* she mused curiously when she watched the birds dance around each other. *How interesting.*

Eventually, the forest led her to a warm clearing. Several flat rocks rested in the sunlight, and on top of those laid multiple starry-furred cats. Spottedpaw flicked her tail when she noticed how their pelts glimmered in the sunlight. When she turned away from the sunbathing cats, she spotted a familiar dark-furred tom and padded

over to him.

"Greetings, Spottedpaw," Shadestar murmured and dipped his head. Next to him sat a tall, fluffy white she-cat that Spottedpaw immediately recognized as Ivorystar.

"Did you summon me here, Shadestar?" Spottedpaw queried with a respectful dip of her head to the two leaders. The blue-eyed tom gave a gentle chuckle and nodded to the cat at his side.

"You give me too much credit. Ivorystar has been asking about you ever since I made it into your dreams." Spottedpaw turned her gaze to the elegant molly and tilted her head curiously. She wondered what Ivorystar could possibly want from her. The molly stood from Shadestar's side and padded forward until she stood in front of the apprentice. Spottedpaw stood there awkwardly when the leader stared her down.

"It's nice to meet you, Ivorystar," she uttered after a lengthy silence. Ivorystar remained silent, though her amber eyes glittered thoughtfully. In a way, Spottedpaw thought she resembled her mentor.

"So this is our brave child," the long-dead leader murmured at last, her deep voice as smooth as honey. "The path ahead of you will not be easy, Spottedpaw. Do you understand this?"

"Er . . . I don't exactly understand what you mean," Spottedpaw stammered. "Is something going to happen?"

"Oh, yes," Ivorystar chuckled. "Be prepared, young one. You have given StarClan and the ancestors of MistClan hope once again."

Spottedpaw cast a confused glance at Shadestar. Though the smoky-furred tom said nothing, she saw amusement glittering deep in his blue eyes. She felt like both cats were speaking in riddles just to toy with her.

"You might not understand now," Shadestar mewed after a heartbeat, "but you must prepare yourself for what will soon

happen. You will undo what's been done, Spottedpaw." The two starry-eyed leaders turned away from her and padded into the ferns that lined the clearing.

"Why can't you explain it *now?"* Spottedpaw demanded and started to chase after them. She was too late, though—the two leaders had vanished from her sight. The apprentice blinked in confusion and found herself just outside a new, empty clearing. She padded forward and almost emerged from the undergrowth, though a frighteningly familiar voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Please!" the voice wailed desperately. "Please, I've been trying to speak to you for so many seasons. I need your guidance." Spottedpaw immediately ducked in the bushes and peered cautiously into the clearing. When she discovered the source of the voice, her breath hitched in her throat. There was no mistaking the snowy-white build in the clearing; it was Frozenleaf.

Spottedpaw briefly wondered where the StarClan cats had vanished to, but quickly banished it from her mind. Right now, she needed to figure out why Frozenleaf appeared in the clearing—and why *she* was seeing the healer.

"Have you chosen somebody else to communicate with? Do you no longer trust me? Is it that apprentice, Spottedpaw?" Frozenleaf demanded, sounding nearly angry. Spottedpaw's eyes widened as the healer continued shouting into nothingness. "She's been suffering from these *nightmares* but will only tell me that there's death in them—I can't get her to open up. I know you've been sending her visions—why won't you speak to me? Why can't she see that I'm on her side? That I'm on *your* side? I've only done what I've had to in order to survive . . . ." Spottedpaw felt a tug at her heart when the healer broke off in a sob. *Has she really been begging for a message from StarClan for so long?* she wondered sympathetically. *Why won't they just talk to her?* She recalled the time when she'd eavesdropped on Frozenleaf and Deadeye, and how Frozenleaf had blamed their silence on his rejection of a leader's name.

Spottedpaw looked around and saw that a dense fog surrounded the clearing. She padded towards it carefully, making sure that every pawstep landed on a leafless ground. When she reached a

paw out to touch the fog, she found that it was impenetrable—a literal wall of fog, as one would say. She turned back to the clearing when Frozenleaf spoke again, her voice now shaky.

"I-I'm at a loss. So much is happening . . . it's not going well anymore, and I'm sure you're well aware. Deadeye's kits have grown so sick, and so fast, but he won't listen. He's slipping. He's not the strong warrior I once knew, and I fear it will only harm us. Please, I *need* to hear from you again." Her voice cracked, and she dipped her head, looking utterly defeated. Spottedpaw took a step forward and stopped dead in her tracks when a twig snapped underneath her. Within an instant, Frozenleaf fixed her gaze on the bushes where Spottedpaw hid.

Spottedpaw hid away from the healer's line of sight. She briefly met her icy gaze and nearly froze up under it. Frozenleaf padded slowly into the undergrowth and, as she drew nearer, Spottedpaw screwed her eyes shut in an attempt to wake herself up. The ferns around her quivered as the healer grew even closer to where she hid.

"Who's there? Reveal yourself." Her voice held a tone of desperation unlike anything Spottedpaw had ever heard before. The golden-furred apprentice pressed herself against the leafy floor in one final attempt to hide herself from the healer. Suddenly, the surrounding undergrowth stilled, and the forest fell silent.

When she opened her eyes again, the clearing—and Frozenleaf—had vanished, along with the fog surrounding it. Spottedpaw scanned the forest around her and found that it was even more unfamiliar than the previous two areas she'd found herself in. Sunlight still twinkled down at her, though it felt much weaker than before.

An ear-splitting screech nearly scared Spottedpaw out of her fur. She searched wildly for the source and saw a hawk perched on a nearby branch. It locked its sights on her and gave another ear-splitting screech; as it did so, the sunlight faded and storm clouds appeared in the distance. Spottedpaw felt her fur ruffle as the wind picked up, swaying the trees of the forest.

The sky soon took on a nasty dark grey hue. The wind howled through the trees and nearly knocked Spottedpaw off of her paws. The hawk let out a screech once more and swooped at her head. Spottedpaw ducked, barely missing its outstretched talons and watching as it flew off into the forest. *What in the world is happening?* she thought incredulously. In only a few heartbeats, the peaceful world around her had turned dark, and the air had grown thick and heavy.

"Be mindful of who you confide in, Spottedpaw." She whipped her head around wildly, searching for the source of the voice. She took up a hurried pace in the direction she thought the voice came from. Thunder rumbled in the distance and rain began to fall gently into the forest. Spottedpaw kept moving forward, though she'd already gotten herself lost. The wind howled again and pushed her to move faster.

Spottedpaw's pace turned into an urgent trot when a pit formed in her belly. Deep down, she felt like something had her in its sights, and whatever it was, it didn't have friendly intentions. She kept pushing her way forward, struggling to identify her surroundings. The current state of the forest directly conflicted with that little she knew of StarClan and its territory.

"You're in danger." Spottedpaw felt panic spark inside of her as she quickened her pace until she was running. The rain pelted against her now, and the droplets stung her every time they made contact with her body. Around her, puddles quickly formed on the forest floor, splashing up at her with every step she took.

The panic within her welled up as the wind howled at her heels. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, until her muscles burned and ached. Beneath her panic was a sense of doom—the sense that something absolutely horrible was coming toward her. It was something that she couldn't outrun.

The forest around Spottedpaw had turned into a blurry mess of colors. Mud coated her paws and underbelly, flattening her fur to her skin uncomfortably. Despite the stinging rain and mud caked to her fur, she kept pushing forward, desperately trying to get away from the disaster that chased her down. *What's after me?* she

questioned wildly, not brave enough to look behind her.

"It's coming." She no longer questioned what was after her—or if it was even an actual thing. The apprentice pushed herself even harder, desperate to reach the voice that spoke to her. She could feel her hope dwindling away, fear and desperation taking its place quickly. The wind howled louder than ever and changed its course; it pressed against Spottedpaw and sent the rain directly into her face. She squinted when the raindrops stung her face and her eyes.

She couldn't see more than a few tail-lengths ahead of her with all the rain. Seemingly out of nowhere, a tree showed up in front of her; the apprentice narrowly missed it, her paws slipping and sliding on the mud underneath her. She instinctively attempted to dig her claws into the earth, hissing when they only slid through the mud.

A silhouette appeared ahead of her and, as she ran, it quickly grew in size. Spottedpaw struggled to make out what the shape could be—at the last moment she realized it was a fallen tree. In a moment of sheer panic, she threw herself over the log, her legs slipping on the mud as she launched herself upward. Just when Spottedpaw thought she'd cleared the fallen log, her hindlegs knocked into it painfully and she tumbled to the ground. Water from the puddles on the ground splashed right up into her face, temporarily blinding her.

Mud immediately seeped into her fur, chilling her to the bone. If it weren't for the rain relentlessly flying against her face, she might have accepted defeat and remained in the puddle of mud she'd landed in. *I have to keep going,* she decided and slowly pushed herself to her paws. *I must hear what this forest is trying to tell me. I can feel it.* She stumbled a bit when she finally stood upright. Once she regained her balance, she hared off into the forest again.

"Run."

Thunder cracked as soon as the voice spoke, rattling off of the trees and deafening Spottedpaw. The ground around her shook with the rumbles of thunder, threatening to throw off her balance once more. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated the sky before another

deafening crack of thunder.

As Spottedpaw raced through the forest, the storm raged on—the further she ran, the more severe it grew. Eventually, it poured so hard that she could barely even see her own paws as she ran. Another screech resonated through the trees, taking Spottedpaw by surprise. She looked up and caught sight of the hawk from before—it flew alongside her, matching her pace exactly. The sight of the hawk filled her with an unexpected sensation of glee. She forced down a childish laugh when the hawk twirled through the rain. The glint of its talons and hooked beak, a glint that would otherwise seem menacing, eased Spottedpaw's concerns even further.

They raced through the woods side-by-side, and though Spottedpaw let herself ease up, there was no ignoring the feeling of foreboding that resurfaced whenever she truly looked at her surroundings. The thunder kept crashing and cracking overhead, while lightning continued to flicker in the distant, stormy sky. She shuddered when she noticed how the forest creaked under the pressure of the winds—if it got much stronger, it would surely uproot even the biggest of trees. *There's no way this is still StarClan territory,* she thought bitterly.

Thunder shook the forest again; it started with an almost soothing rumble that increased in both volume and ferocity until sickening cracks echoed off of the trees. Dark clouds billowed in the wind, surging through the sky as if they threatened the forest. Sharp talons snapped together in front of Spottedpaw's face, demanding her attention.

"What?" she demanded when she turned to the hawk once again. The brown-feathered creature tilted its head at her again before gliding off into the forest—and deeper into the storm. Spottedpaw shook her head in disbelief and, against her better judgment, decided to follow it. She tore through the forest behind the bird; her legs burned once more as she struggled to keep up. The drumming of the rain drowned out all the noises of the forest; she could only hear the thunder over it. Spottedpaw winced and faltered when a few leaves smacked her in the face, leaving her cheeks burning from the impact. She hesitated when she heard another rumble of thunder in the distance. After listening for a moment, she decided

that it was too far away to worry about. Up ahead, the hawk veered to the right, so she swerved around a muddy corner and pushed even harder to catch up.

Once again, the crack of thunder deafened her and shook the forest. Lighting split the sky in half, blinding Spottedpaw for what seemed like an eternity. She screwed her eyes shut and skidded to a complete halt, slipping and sliding through the mud as she grasped wildly for a foothold. There was another sickening series of cracks —this was a new sound, though. It sounded as though something was splitting in half. She opened her eyes, forcing herself to recover from the blinding lighting, just in time to see a dead, charred up tree topple over.

The hawk let out a screech and tried to fly underneath the plummeting tree, only to be crushed underneath its weight. For a reason she couldn't quite place, Spottedpaw felt her heart wrench at the sight. She cried out and darted forward to the blackened tree. Her paws instinctively lashed out, and she attempted to dig the hawk out from under the tree. When the tree only shifted in the mud, her heart withered in her chest.

The rain pounded harder against the forest floor, its steady drumming turning into an aggressive roar. Spottedpaw felt the world sway around her and her stomach lurched as nausea overwhelmed all of her senses. The storm raged on and the thunder crashed more and more often until it was almost all she could hear.

Off in the distance, she heard a faint roaring noise—the noise of rushing water, perhaps. To Spottedpaw, it sounded just like the river below the gorge, roaring as it flowed and tearing down anything in its path. There was something different about this sound, though. Spottedpaw stumbled a bit in her nauseous daze, trying to discern what felt so different about this sound.

After a few moments, she regained her composure and realized that the ground beneath her trembled. The roaring sound of water grew louder—closer, and as it did so, the earth below her shuddered more aggressively. The apprentice narrowed her eyes and inspected the forest floor, unaware of how the roaring grew louder yet.

Spottedpaw snapped her head up when a new noise caught her attention—nearly identical to the sound she'd heard when the dead tree toppled over. Trees were being uprooted and, by the sound of it, they weren't too far off. She whipped her head around and scanned the forest for a sign of the destruction that threatened her. Through the trees she saw an unusual movement, and her eyes widened when she realized what was racing toward her.

Trees got uprooted left and right, some flung against larger, sturdier trees. A massive wall of water—taller than the trees, even—rushed straight at Spottedpaw. Every instinct screamed at her, telling her to run, but she felt frozen where she stood. *Oh, StarClan,* she thought desperately, *What is this supposed to mean?* She had no doubt that this was an omen of some sort. As she desperately tried to put the pieces together, she screwed her eyes shut and braced herself against the rushing wave, willing herself to wake up safe in her nest. The roar of the water overwhelmed her senses entirely, shaking the world around her; right when she expected the wave to hit her, it all stopped. The forest grew eerily quiet.

She opened her eyes and let out a gasp of relief when she saw the familiar cave walls around her. The apprentices' den was empty, and after her initial relief receded, a sense of doom welled up inside her once again. The more she tried to put meaning to her dreams, the less she understood—and the more hopeless she felt.

Chapter 13

[image]

Spottedpaw yawned as she waited to depart on the sunset patrol. Just outside of the healer's den sat Deadeye's three kits, now apprentices, coughing weakly; Dapplepaw was the frailest of them all, and Blackpaw didn't look much better, with his black fur unkempt and his eyes glossy. Sunpaw was hardly in better shape than her siblings, but she at least didn't cough as weakly as they did.

Ever since they had caught the whitecough—which had since grown into a nasty bout greencough—Deadeye had become more volatile. Spottedpaw couldn't help her increasing feelings of dread when he snapped at warriors and apprentices throughout the days. She recalled her own confrontation with their one-eyed leader only a few moons prior, shivering as she remembered just how menacing he was.

He shouldn't have made them apprentices, she thought sympathetically. *They were too weak then, and now he's pushed them to their limits.* Even Frozenleaf, their healer, had spoken out against their apprenticeship. Spottedpaw knew her to follow and respect most of Deadeye's decisions, and witnessing an outburst of defiance from Frozenleaf left her—and most of her campmates uneasy. Ever since the argument, Deadeye had thrown Frozenleaf innumerable scowls and glares.

"Let all cats old enough to eliminate their own prey gather before the Smoothstone!" Deadeye's scratchy yowl pulled her from her thoughts. There was an unusual edge to his tone, and when she glanced at him she saw just how furious he was. Spottedpaw glanced around uneasily and saw that the gathering cats shared her feelings, many of their eyes glittering with uncertainty.

"It has come to my attention that we have a traitor in our midst. Someone in this camp has been spreading lies about things that do not exist." Spottedpaw felt a pit form in her stomach as the crowd

around her murmured amongst themselves. She searched the throng of cats, desperately looking for her mentor or her friend. Venom dripped from the one-eyed leader's voice with each word he spoke, and made her increasingly uneasy.

When she spotted the familiar cream pelt of Hawkscar, she stood to move by his side. Her mentor hadn't noticed her yet; he kept his gaze fixed intently on their leader. She halted in her tracks when Deadeye spoke again, his words filling her with sheer dread.

"Someone in this camp has been pretending that StarClan is more than just silly nursery tales. Even worse, this cat has been claiming that they've received omens in the form of dreams. Such heresy is unacceptable here, as are the guidelines within our code, and the culprit will be reasonably punished for their actions."

Spottedpaw felt her blood run cold when he spoke. She had no doubt that Deadeye spoke of her, but she couldn't figure out who had told him. The only two cats she had confided in were Hawkscar and Nightpaw—Hawkscar was so adamant that she shouldn't tell anyone that she knew he couldn't have told a soul, and Nightpaw didn't have a malicious hair on her body.

For a brief moment, her gaze locked with her mentor's. His deep amber eyes were wide with horror, his tail quivering with unease. Before Spottedpaw could rush to him, Deadeye launched himself down from the Smoothstone, his single amber eye raking over the crowd. She froze in her spot when she met his gaze and saw fury spark within it. His lips curled, forming a sneer as he shoved his way through the cats. He halted in front of her, fixing her with a fiery, accusing glare.

"Spottedpaw, you've blatantly broken the rules we uphold here in the Gorge. I should have known when I saw you fooling around with those Clan cats, but I simply wanted to believe in you." Spottedpaw had to hold back a cringe when Deadeye faked a sickeningly wounded tone. The surrounding cats gasped in disbelief, many of them reeling back several steps. Outside of the medicine den, Frozenleaf and Shortpaw watched with their eyes wide in disbelief. Snowface and Frostheart shoved their way through the crowd, each giving the apprentice disgusted glances when they

emerged.

"I knew you were nothing but trouble," Frostheart sneered at her.

"I suppose it can't be helped," Snowface commented slyly. "Surely she isn't entirely to blame—it's no secret that her mentor's got a soft spot for her. Perhaps he has allowed this to happen." Spottedpaw felt her heart drop to her stomach when the gazes that were previously fixed on her turned to Hawkscar. The cream-striped tom only stared at Spottedpaw sadly; an expression that filled her with dread. *Don't look at me like that,* she begged silently. *Don't give up right now . . . .*

"Silence!" Deadeye's yowl echoed off the cave walls. "It matters not to me how this came to be. Spottedpaw will be punished for her actions against the Gorge." He paused for a moment, as though contemplating her fate. Spottedpaw slowly backed away from the slender tom, only to bump into someone else. When she dared a glance over her shoulder, she gulped when she saw her father scowling down at her.

"I'm ashamed to call you my kin," Greyheart muttered, his tone rife with contempt. The scar-covered golden tabby shoved her back towards their leader harshly, and Spottedpaw sent dust flying upwards as she stumbled.

"I suppose this provides a magnificent opportunity for you, Hawkscar," Deadeye finally murmured. The black tom fixed his sights on the warrior and narrowed his eye disdainfully. "You have defended this traitor time and time again. Are you willing to prove your loyalty to me, or should I have you executed as well?" Spottedpaw's breath caught in her throat when he said that word—*executed*. That couldn't be her fate—not after everything the ancestors told her.

"What will you have me do, Deadeye?" Hawkscar stepped forward hesitantly and maintained eye contact with their leader. Spottedpaw felt a surge of respect for him. He could even face a cat as frightening as Deadeye, and somehow stay so composed; she never imagined any cat could do it.

The cave fell quiet when Deadeye didn't respond. He turned to Spottedpaw once again, fixing her with a stare so sinister, she thought she would burn up right where she stood. She felt the stares of Frostheart, Snowface, and Greyheart burning into her pelt. Hesitantly, Spottedpaw cast her gaze around the camp, resisting the urge to shrink away from the withering looks she met. Hope flared up in her heart when she saw Nightpaw crouched by the apprentices' den, though it receded almost as fast as it had blossomed when she saw how terrified her friend looked. Beside the grey-speckled molly, she saw Pearlpaw sitting. The pale tabby drew a paw over her ear happily and shot Spottedpaw a mocking glance. If the situation were any less dire, Spottedpaw would have considered throwing a hateful look back. She brought her attention back to Deadeye, wincing when he sneered at her again.

"You will kill her." A fiery glint flashed across his eye as he glowered at Spottedpaw. A few cats gasped and murmured amongst one another. The apprentice tried to hold the sleek tom's gaze, but only found herself shrinking away yet again. Behind her, Greyheart kept a firm stance and blocked her from escaping the gazes that pierced her.

Spottedpaw gave a gasp when her father nudged her toward her mentor. She looked to Hawkscar for help, but his expression was unreadable once more. The cream-striped tom dipped his head obediently to Deadeye and padded up to Spottedpaw. Once he stood in front of her, he froze and sent a hesitant glance at the cats surrounding them.

Hawkscar slowly shifted his gaze back toward his apprentice, his eyes looking thoughtful. Spottedpaw felt her stomach turn when she met his stare. *He wouldn't actually kill me, would he?* she thought to herself desperately. *What if he does . . . ? Has he tricked me into doing this?* As intrusive, gut-wrenching thoughts forced their way into her mind, the surrounding crowd leaned forward in anticipation. She felt sickened and anxious, her pelt heating up and her tail twitching uncontrollably.

"Is it impossible to get some space in a cave as large as this?" Hawkscar broke the silence with a flick of his tail. He sent a deliberate glance at Deadeye, who merely narrowed his eye in

response. The black-furred leader held Hawkscar's gaze, contemplating the request.

"I suppose it would do no harm," he murmured after a moment. He swept his tail at the crowd of cats, and, slowly, they moved away from Hawkscar and Spottedpaw. Deadeye padded to the base of the Smoothstone and sat, though he remained tensed and ready to pounce.

Hawkscar cleared his throat and turned back to Spottedpaw, fixing her with an intent stare. She cowered before him and trembled uncontrollably, no longer able to hold his gaze. Instead, she stared at his paws and shuddered when more intrusive thoughts engulfed her. Though he said nothing, Spottedpaw could feel his gaze—and the stares of everyone else—burning into her fur. When she dared a glance upward, she saw that Snowface and Frostheart had remained a little closer than the rest of the cats. Not too far away from them sat Greyheart, his greyish eyes dark with disappointment.

Spottedpaw threw her gaze back down at her paw and saw that Hawkscar had started unsheathing his claws slowly. He scraped them against the stone floor, causing a soft screeching noise that sent chills down Spottedpaw's spine. She winced and gulped as the urge to flee grew within her, her legs tensing up instinctively.

Suddenly, Hawkscar stepped forward, closing what little distance remained between the two of them. With his claws still unsheathed, he leaned forward until his breath tickled her ear.

"Run away—find Swallowclaw," he whispered urgently. "He'll know what to do. And Spottedpaw, whatever you do, don't turn back." Spottedpaw felt her heart drop when her mentor stepped back and lifted his unsheathed claws. The fading light of the day broke through a crevice in the cave's ceiling, shining on the tom and embellishing the scar on his shoulder. He gave Spottedpaw a kindhearted glance and, within a heartbeat, threw himself at Snowface. The grey-and-white tom yowled in pain when Hawkscar dug his teeth into the other tom's shoulder and threw him into the crowd of cats.

Spottedpaw shrunk away quickly as cats scattered the cave. At the back of the crowd, she saw Mudwing stumble backwards in surprise and retreat into the warriors' den. She gulped when a shadow loomed over her, and she looked up and met the glare of Frostheart. He lifted an unsheathed claw and prepared to swing upon her when Hawkscar crashed into his side.

"Run, Spottedpaw! Hurry!" Spottedpaw quickly backed away from the chaos in front of her, her heart leaping to her throat as the two warriors tumbled across the cave. A loud snarl rang through the air and Deadeye stormed forward, tearing the two cats apart and easily overpowering Hawkscar. When Spottedpaw glanced around the cave, she noticed that many cats had joined the fight—Riverpaw and Dustpaw faced off outside the apprentices' den, while her own parents threw claws at one another. Coldstep leapt forward and swatted Snowface further into the chaotic crowd.

"Get her!" Deadeye screeched when the rest of the cats threw frightened glances at one another. He shoved Hawkscar's face against the stone-cold floor; blood pooled on the ground when Deadeye dug his claws into the warrior's throat. The cream warrior shot one last urgent look at Spottedpaw, who immediately turned around and fled from the caves. She heard Deadeye let out another demanding caterwaul as she blundered through the cave entrance. Briefly, Spottedpaw worried about Hawkscar, but she banished the thought when she heard claws scraping at the ground behind her.

As Spottedpaw burst onto the cliff's edge, a powerful wind hit her in full force, carrying the scent of rain. She dared a glance over the edge, gasping when she saw how violently the river below thrashed around. Yowls behind her sent her scrabbling up the cliff; she immediately raced at full speed into the forest, with no set destination in mind.

Thunder rumbled threateningly off in the distance. Behind her, Deadeye's warriors crashed through the forest, yowling commands to each other. Spottedpaw's heart raced in her chest as she weaved through the trees and undergrowth in an attempt to throw them off her trail. Within moments, her mouth grew parched and her breathing grew labored.

Spottedpaw kept fleeing through the forest, feeling a bit of hope ignite in her chest when she spotted Boulderdrop through the trees. She rushed forward and burst out of the trees. The apprentice circled the mass of looming boulders before leaping up onto an overhanging ledge. She wedged herself back against a crevice, hoping that she could gain an advantage from this spot. The light around her slowly faded and, when she looked up, she saw ominous storm clouds covering the sky.

Below her, she heard the undergrowth thrash wildly as some cat burst into the clearing surrounding the rocks. Spottedpaw froze and held her breath; her heart pounded painfully against her chest when she heard the cat grow closer to the stones.

"Spottedpaw, I know you're here. Come out and I promise, I'll make this quick and painless." Spottedpaw's heart leapt to her throat when she heard Frostheart's malicious voice echo up to her. Scuffling around the edge of the rocks warned her, and she knew that if she didn't act fast, the grey warrior would find her. She cast a glance up at the clouds once more and gave herself a determined nod before launching herself off of the boulders. Frostheart cursed loudly as she hared into the forest once again.

Almost immediately, the grey warrior was on her tail. He called out to her furiously and tore through the trees behind her. Thunder cracked above them along with a blinding flash of lightning before rain started pouring down on the forest. Spottedpaw glanced over her shoulder, and when she saw that the lightning temporarily blinded Frostheart. Memories of her late-night lessons with Hawkscar resurfaced in her mind, and she sped off and dove into a thicket of ferns.

Once safely hidden in the undergrowth, Spottedpaw tried to calm herself. She could hear Frostheart cursing to himself several fox-lengths away and pressed herself against the forest floor. The drumming of the rain helped to ease her mind; she closed her eyes and tried to think of a solution. *Hawkscar said that Swallowclaw would know how to help,* she reminded herself firmly. *I know this part of the forest—BlazeClan territory is only a bit north of here. If I can just make it there, I'll be safe.*

The surrounding ferns shook wildly as Frostheart neared, the tom blundering through them carefully. The entire time, Spottedpaw could hear him cursing to himself angrily—she heard him whack the nearby leaves a few times, each time cursing more angrily when another *thwack* followed. She held down her laughter as she imagined the ferns smacking the grey tom in the face. Suddenly, the tom silenced himself and the ferns slowly settled. Spottedpaw held her breath and looked around warily.

"There you are!" Frostheart snarled and tackled her down. He gouged his claws into her shoulder furiously and Spottedpaw let out a screech as pain coursed through her body. She panicked when the warrior pinned her down, his eyes dark and his expression smug. "Come on back to the cave with me," he purred devilishly. "We'll let you see Hawkscar again." The tom broke off in cruel laughter, and Spottedpaw felt her heart drop to her stomach again.

Her panic subsided and rage replaced it, the red-hot fury surging through her veins and masking the searing pain on her shoulder. The apprentice went limp underneath his grasp and, when he loosened his grip, she broke free and turned to face the tom. One look at him, and Spottedpaw recalled how he had treated her poorly ever since she first became an apprentice. Then she remembered how Frostheart had ruthlessly killed Heatherstorm, and how Deadeye praised him, as if he was some kind of hero. She remembered his brother, Snowface, telling Deadeye about her reaction during the border argument—and how that decision had led Spottedpaw to fear for her life. Finally she thought of Hawkscar, and how her mentor attacked them so she could be safe.

When Spottedpaw started trembling furiously, Frostheart let out a mocking belt of laughter. She narrowed her eyes, the edges of her vision blurring as her rage grew. Frostheart's smug laughter only further fueled her rage. The tom lashed a paw out at her; Spottedpaw ducked instinctively in response, her line-of-sight narrowing until all she could focus on was her opponent.

She flexed her claws against the mud beneath her and darted up to Frostheart quickly. With a low growl of defiance, she lashed her claws out, raking them across his face. Blood spurted out of a slash across his face and he let out a wail of pain. At the sight of blood,

Spottedpaw became painfully aware of her own bleeding shoulder and backed away from the reeling warrior quickly.

"Oh, I'll get you for this," Frostheart snarled as he stumbled around blindly. Thunder crashed again and Spottedpaw raced away, desperately trying to make her way through the territory. *I have to escape,* she told herself desperately. *I have to find Swallowclaw.* Even though her now-bloody shoulder screamed in defiance at every movement, she pushed herself and ran faster than she'd ever run before.

Lightning stretched across the sky again, lighting up the surrounding forest. Up ahead, Spottedpaw thought she could see a break in the trees and, more importantly, the terrain of BlazeClan territory. Several yowls and caterwauls sounded in the forest behind her, pushing her to run even faster. She knew that if she didn't get there soon, they'd catch her. The undergrowth behind her thrashed about wildly, and she realized that her pursuers were right on her tail.

Just when she thought she wouldn't make it, Spottedpaw erupted from the forest and stumbled across the barren ground of BlazeClan territory. The apprentice gave a yelp as sharp pebbles pierced the pads of her feet. She threw one last glance at the forest that she called her home and raced away across the unfamiliar territory. Thunder cracked once more and lightning split the sky in half; the rain poured even harder on the dried-up ground beneath her. As she fled, Spottedpaw noticed the few trees and sections of plants flourish in the storm.

Spottedpaw stayed so focused on fleeing, she hadn't thought of where the camp might be—she only ran blindly across the territory, ignoring her burning muscles and the blood that seeped from her wounded shoulder. The golden she-cat stumbled a bit as her vision started blurring, though she tried to push on further still. *I must find Swallowclaw,* she reminded herself sternly.

Up ahead, she thought she spotted the silhouettes of several cats, but her vision was too blurry to make them out. Spottedpaw stumbled a bit before her legs gave out beneath her. She tumbled to the soaking earth, lacking the energy to even yelp if she bumped

her shoulder or head. Ahead of her, she heard surprised yowls sound off. In her confused and exhausted state, she worried that Deadeye's warriors had caught up to her.

"Isn't this the apprentice from the Gorge?" The voice felt familiar to Spottedpaw, though she couldn't make out who it belonged to. Her vision darkened even more; when the cats surrounded her, all she could see was blurry shadows in the storm.

"Spottedpaw?! What happened?" This voice sounded even more familiar than the last. *Is that Jayleaf?* she thought hopefully, but when she opened her mouth to greet them, only a weak croak came out.

"I need to find Swallowclaw," Spottedpaw uttered weakly—though she only meant to tell herself that.

"We should get her back to the camp. That gash on her shoulder looks serious. Talonstrike, help me carry her." Spottedpaw's stomach lurched as they lifted her. She gave a final weak groan before blackness covered her vision, and her body and senses went numb.

Chapter 14

When Spottedpaw came to, she realized she was in a den she'd never seen before. The comforting scent of assorted herbs washed over her and eased her anxiety; she realized she must be in some kind of medicine den. Spottedpaw cast her gaze around the den slowly and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. She spotted a deep crevice and several rows of ledges along a wall made of stone. Bundles of herbs sat lined and sorted along the ledges, and a shuffling noise came from inside the crevice. Brambles lines the sides of the den and leaves were woven intricately along the ceiling, with some brambles entangled with them as well.

Immediately growing restless, Spottedpaw tensed and moved to stand up. As she rose to her paws, her muscles and bones screamed in defiance at the pain that surged through them. The apprentice gave a hiss at the pain and stumbled a bit before her legs gave out, landing her back in her nest.

"You're far too weak to get up yet, apprentice." A blueish grey tom emerged from the crevice and shook his head in amusement. Spottedpaw looked him over and saw that his dull fur was sticking out at the ends, and he was remarkably skinny. Behind him, a dark grey she-cat sorted through the herbs on the ledges—her fur almost blended in with the wall of the den.

"Your shoulder wound isn't too deep, luckily," the she-cat added, turning from her task to face Spottedpaw. "You lost quite a bit of blood, though, presumably from running far too much after you received it." The skinny blue-grey tom left the den awkwardly, and the she-cat padded over to Spottedpaw.

An uncomfortable silence fell over them for a few heartbeats, but it felt like ages to Spottedpaw. The apprentice shuffled her paws self-consciously and tried to keep her mind from wandering the events of the previous day, though she had no success. Spottedpaw thought back to Hawkscar, wondering if he had somehow survived the battle with Deadeye. She knew that it would have been nearly

impossible, but deep inside her chest, hope flickered faintly.

"I'm Skyfeather. That old furball is Blueheart. If he gets cranky with you, just ignore him," the female medicine cat spoke after a moment. She swished her fluffy tail around and fixed her light blue eyes on Spottedpaw. "You know, my brother will not stop trying to check on you. He claims that you're good friends." When Spottedpaw looked confused, Skyfeather let out a gentle laugh.

"Your brother?" Spottedpaw asked slowly, giving the healer—no, the medicine cat a guarded glance. She couldn't think of a cat that resembled her much, though her build reminded her of Nightpaw. *Oh, Nightpaw,* Spottedpaw thought to herself sadly. *I might never see you again.* Even though Spottedpaw suspected that her friend might have turned her in—after all, the apprentice had only told Hawkscar and Nightpaw—she wished she could see her friend again.

"Jayleaf, of course," Skyfeather chuckled. "Some of our youngest warriors seemed a bit shaken up to see a bloodied Gorge apprentice brought into camp, especially with that raging storm. Even so, they wanted to check on you, as well. Some of them even recognized you." Skyfeather kept chatting lightheartedly with Spottedpaw, who didn't say much in return.

Spottedpaw let her gaze wander the den while she listened to Skyfeather. The she-cat seemed friendly enough—and, under different circumstances, Spottedpaw might have jumped to befriend her. Eventually, her wandering gaze flitted to her own body, her disheveled fur sticking out noticeably. For the first time, she noticed the poultice and cobwebs on her shoulder and stretched her leg awkwardly. Spottedpaw held back a hiss when the action brought on a fresh wave of pain.

"Now, don't go screwing up my dressing," Skyfeather scolded her quickly. Spottedpaw's ears heated up in embarrassment. "If it looks alright tomorrow, we can take it off and see how you fare without it. Does that sound good to you?"

"I suppose that's fine," Spottedpaw murmured reluctantly. She despised the idea of being stuck in the medicine den, even if these

cats were far more friendly than what she was accustomed to.

The entrance to the medicine den rustled violently and caught her attention. Spottedpaw tensed up, prepared to fight any intruder; she blinked in surprise when Blueheart nosed his way into the den, followed by Heatherstar and a yellow tabby tom. The three cats seated themselves by Spottedpaw, and the apprentice shuffled her paws nervously in response. Hesitantly, she met their gazes and saw that the yellow tabby's gaze glittered with suspicion. Heatherstar, however, fixed Spottedpaw with a curious gaze.

"Spottedpaw," the black she-cat started slowly, as though choosing her words delicately. Heatherstar trailed off and kept her gaze locked on Spottedpaw, her eyes flickering back and forth as if she were searching for something. The large yellow tabby stepped forward and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his voice curt. Spottedpaw glanced between the two newcomers warily. In a weird way, she thought that the yellow tabby resembled Hawkscar. His pale amber eyes stayed guarded and emotionless, just like her cream-furred mentor.

"Don't be so cold, Yellowheart," Heatherstar murmured, her voice as warm as honey. The black-furred leader turned to the wounded apprentice and gave her a kind look. "I understand it might be hard for you to recall so soon—er, Spottedpaw, is it?—but it would be *incredibly* helpful if you could tell us what happened to you."

Spottedpaw opened her mouth to speak, only for her words to escape her. The she-cat shuffled her paws anxiously as her heart flitted around in her chest like butterflies. Both the cats standing in front of Spottedpaw fixed her with expectant stares. When Spottedpaw struggled to find her voice, Heatherstar took a delicate step forward and placed a paw over the apprentice's.

"A couple of our warriors told me that they recognized you from an argument at the borders," the kind leader murmured. "They mentioned how you stayed back and disengaged when your own Clanmates threatened us. I can only imagine what kind of trouble

that got you in with Deadeye." Spottedpaw flinched visibly at the memory from that day, and at the mention of the cruel, one-eyed tom. Once more, she recalled what Hawkscar had told her, and she finally found her voice.

"I was told Swallowclaw will know how to help," Spottedpaw whispered, her voice hoarse. "Can he be here to listen, too?"

"Yellowheart, fetch him for me." Heatherstar swept her tail around her paws, her blue eyes not once leaving the apprentice. The yellow tabby dipped his head and retreated from the den hesitantly.

Spottedpaw shifted once more, uncomfortable under the leader's curious gaze. The apprentice let her own gaze flit around the den as she attempted to mask her awkwardness. The medicine cats had both shuffled off to their own corners of the den; Skyfeather continued sorting through the herbs on the ledges of the back wall, while Blueheart inspected a shallow pool near one of the furthest corners.

Spottedpaw looked closer and saw that water trickled gently through a crevice in the corner. Brambles and leaves were woven carefully over the hole that led the water into the den. *Is that to manage the water flow?* Spottedpaw thought, her interest spiking. *That pond must be very useful to have here.* Even though the pool had briefly caught her attention, Spottedpaw was still painfully aware of Heatherstar watching her.

"She's in the medicine den." Muffled voices sounded just outside of the den; the brambles at the entrance rustled noisily soon after. Yellowheart nosed his way into the den carefully, followed by Swallowclaw. Spottedpaw felt a wave of relief wash over her when she saw the familiar brown tabby. Heatherstar and Yellowheart exchanged a wordless glance, after which Yellowheart dipped his head and retreated from the den once more.

"It gets so cramped in this tiny den," Heatherstar commented softly, her gaze flitting back to Spottedpaw. Spottedpaw gulped and ignored her stare. Instead, she gave Swallowclaw her attention.

"Spottedpaw, what happened at the Gorge?" the dark tom asked quietly. Though he sat calmly in front of the apprentice, his amber eyes were darkened with worry and the tip of his fluffy tail flicked anxiously. Swallowclaw's gaze darted nervously to her wounded shoulder, resting there for only a moment before flitting away. Spottedpaw took a deep breath and held his gaze.

"Hawkscar taught me about StarClan," she started hesitantly, struggling to stay calm as memories of her mentor flooded back to her. "He always said that we—the apprentices—deserve to know about our ancestors. Somehow, Deadeye found out, and he told Hawkscar that he had to kill me to prove his loyalty. He attacked them all, just to protect me." Spottedpaw trailed off and trembled softly, remembering the reassuring and urging expression her mentor had given her before she fled. Deep within his amber eyes, she knew that she had seen a hint of desperation, and perhaps even fear. When she tried to recall the scene, Spottedpaw felt her body grow hot and her senses blurred together.

"Why would he have you killed for Hawkscar's mistake?" Swallowclaw wondered aloud, an intent stare fixated on the apprentice. Spottedpaw shot her gaze to the floor of the den quickly. She knew better than to reveal her dreams and visions to just any cat—the recent events at the Gorge taught her that much.

"Hawkscar wouldn't die, right?" she whispered. "H-He can get away, too . . . ." Spottedpaw trembled again as she remembered catching Hawkscar's gaze when Deadeye overpowered him; she remembered the blood that pooled around the cream-furred tom, how quickly it stained his coat. Spottedpaw's stomach turned and her vision swayed nauseatingly the more she tried to think of it. A tail rested along her shoulder comfortingly, pulling her out of her panicked state. Swallowclaw had shuffled next to her and rested his tail over her shoulders soothingly, with his head lowered sadly.

"He was one of my best friends," the dark-furred tom murmured and turned to the leader, whose gaze hadn't once left the apprentice. "Heatherstar, please take her in. Hawkscar cared for her as if she were his own kin; sheltering her would be the least I could do for my old friend. Remember his roots, Heatherstar." Spottedpaw flicked an ear and let her gaze fall to the black-furred she-cat in

front of them. Heatherstar's blue eyes glittered curiously as she returned the gaze.

"You may leave, now, Swallowclaw," Heatherstar spoke after a few wordless heartbeats. "I'd like to have a few words with Blueheart, and I believe there's one more visitor for this young apprentice." Swallowclaw said nothing, merely staring at his leader before bowing his head respectfully and leaving the den.

"One more visitor?" Spottedpaw echoed softly, staring absently at the black-furred she-cat.

"Yes, Jayleaf still wishes to see you." The leader narrowed her eyes slightly when she turned to the apprentice, an expectant glimmer in her gaze. "Spottedpaw, you know that if anything else happened in the Gorge—anything at all—you can be honest about it here. Nobody would judge you for anything that happened." Spottedpaw met Heatherstar's stare and opened her mouth to speak. For a few moments, she couldn't think of how to respond to the leader; she wondered if it was the Heatherstar's way of saying that she knew something more happened under Deadeye's command. Part of her also worried that it might be a threat of some kind. Before she could respond, Jayleaf nosed his way into the medicine den noisily.

"Spottedpaw!" the grey tabby exclaimed, his eyes wide with relief. "Thank StarClan you're okay. I was so worried when we found you in that storm." Jayleaf rushed to the resting apprentice and inspected her wound worriedly. Heatherstar let her gaze rest on Spottedpaw for a few moments more, then she padded to the pool in the furthest corner of the den and sat near Blueheart.

"It's nice to see you, Jayleaf," Spottedpaw murmured awkwardly. She felt odd speaking with him again outside of the Gathering. *It's a good kind of odd feeling,* she thought to herself, resisting her urge to cast a wary glance around her. *I can speak freely here.*

"They finally decided to let you pester my patient, brother?" Skyfeather purred affectionately and joined the two cats. Jayleaf gave a playful roll of his eyes and flicked his tail at the dark grey she-cat.

"If I were pestering her, I'd have already lost my tail, Skyfeather," he retorted, amusement gleaming in his eyes.

"You'd be missing more than your tail!" Spottedpaw snorted instinctively. She felt her fur grow hot when the siblings in front of her froze, only for them to burst out in laughter shortly after. Spottedpaw gave a few hesitant chuckles and let herself relax in the company of her friend.

The three of them joked and chatted for most of the day, or at least what was left of it. Eventually Skyfeather left to attend her *medicine cat duties,* as she worded it, leaving Jayleaf and Spottedpaw alone. Jayleaf grew quieter, and the wounded apprentice wondered if he would ask to know what happened. *Am I allowed to tell everyone else what happened?* she wondered to herself, suddenly feeling exhausted. *Even if I am, I don't know if I have the energy for it anymore.* No matter how relaxed Spottedpaw allowed herself to get, the scene she left behind her continued to lurk in the back of her mind. The painful mixture of fear and encouragement in her mentor's eyes burned into her memories.

"I know you're waiting for me to ask about it," Jayleaf murmured, startling Spottedpaw. "But you must be exhausted—I mean, I know you've probably already told Heatherstar and Yellowheart everything that happened. You don't have to bring it all back again." Spottedpaw glanced at him hesitantly, guilt creeping up her spine. She tried to justify the truth she'd hidden away, convincing herself that nobody needed to know about her dreams or visions.

After some time, Heatherstar retreated from the medicine den. Spottedpaw dared a glance at the leader and saw that her eyes, for the first time since she entered the den, were dark with worry. Concern shifted within her at the expression on the black cat's face, but she pushed it aside and gave Jayleaf her attention again.

"You don't have to worry about her," the tom mumbled, following her gaze. "She doesn't like to turn away anyone in need; I'm sure she'll let you stay, especially when Swallowclaw and I vouched for you."

"She also has plenty of reasons to hate Deadeye," Spottedpaw retorted quietly, wondering if the leader would make her leave when she healed. She couldn't forget that the one-eyed tom had declared war on BlazeClan. *He'd be twisted enough to stage something just like this,* she told herself sourly. *And if he didn't, he'd probably kill her for sheltering me.*

"As do you," Jayleaf snorted matter-of-factly and flicked his tail. "Spottedpaw, I might not know what happened, but I know he would have had you *killed* had you stayed there. I saw that wound when you fled onto our territory—I saw the desperation and fear in your eyes. You and Heatherstar share a common enemy, and it's someone who has personally hurt both of you. She has no reason to turn you away—not now."

Spottedpaw sighed softly and let her gaze meet Jayleaf's. He made a solid point—what sense would there be in sending the apprentice away after Deadeye tried to kill her? The two groups of cats were already on the brink of war; if anything, Spottedpaw was an asset to BlazeClan, having been raised in the Gorge.

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Skyfeather called out teasingly from across the den. The dark grey medicine cat joined the two once more, her fur smelling strongly of fresh herbs. "You're not causing trouble again, are you, Jayleaf?" Spottedpaw held back a chuckle when the young warrior shifted beside her, clearly taken aback.

"N-No! I'm just trying to help her feel better, Sky," Jayleaf huffed in exasperation. Spottedpaw tilted her head a bit when he said her name. *It's like a shortened version of her name,* she thought curiously. *Is that normal for the Clans, too?*

While worry about the future settled in Spottedpaw's belly, she wondered whether they would allow her to stay with the Clan. If they permitted her to stay, she knew that there was much to learn about their ways of life. Despite her shock over everything that had happened, Spottedpaw found herself hoping her presence benefitted Heatherstar enough to stay.

Chapter 15

Spottedpaw stumbled as cats swarmed through the cave, knocking her around. She felt her insides churn at the familiar feeling of the cave floor that she called her home. *No, this isn't right,* she thought as she struggled to keep her panic at bay. *I got out, I was safe. Why am I back here?!* Pelts blurred together as cats writhed around her, fighting one another savagely.

In a corner, she saw Nightpaw cowering under the malicious glares of Pearlpaw and Dustpaw. Spottedpaw tried calling out to her friend, but no words came out of her mouth. Panic continued to bubble up inside of her, threatening to spill over. Despite all her senses telling her to escape, Spottedpaw stayed rooted to her spot and watched the cats around her tumble with claws flying. Screeches and yowls echoed off the walls of the caves, overwhelming her senses.

Through the disarray—and her own panic, Spottedpaw picked out a few more cats she recognized. Near the Smoothstone, Foxleap and Greyheart faced off. Her father looked as unforgiving as ever, while her mother's eyes were bright with fury. Behind her was Riverpaw, pressing himself against the large stone and watching their argument with wide eyes. Not far off, Coldstep was lashing out at her Snowface and Frostheart. Upon closer inspection, Spottedpaw saw that the cloudy-furred tom had the same wound she left him with when she escaped.

When she cast her gaze further into the swarming mass of cats, she spotted the familiar black-and-white fur of Mudwing. He was one of the few who remained still in the cave, standing rigid as his campmates fought all around him. Spottedpaw took a few pawsteps forward and saw his face—his eyes were wide with dismay, his mouth agape in a silent scream. When Spottedpaw followed his gaze, she felt her heart drop to her stomach.

In the middle of the cave, a familiar creamy-furred tom slumped in a puddle of blood. The shrieking of cats faded out until only a

deafening silence existed; it was the kind of silence so heavy that you can only hear the ringing of your ears. The writhing and slashing of the cats around her slowed until they were frozen mid-attack. Beneath her, Spottedpaw's legs felt weak, and the ground swayed. She took a few pathetic steps forward, only to freeze again when she heard an all-too-familiar laugh.

"His death is on you, Spottedpaw," Deadeye sneered mockingly, though he was nowhere to be seen. Spottedpaw dared a few glances around, thinking she saw a flash of his black fur in the frozen crowd around her. "You knew the consequences of your actions, and yet you insisted on spewing nonsense about some dead cats. And now, your poor mentor is resting in a pool of his own blood, the only cat that cared for you . . . ." The sound of a pebble skipping across the floor came from behind Spottedpaw, and she whipped around only to see the still-frozen Gorge cats. She felt her heartbeat picked up as her panic rose even more, her breath coming out in ragged, desperate gasps.

"Y-You're wrong," she responded in between gasps. "You caused this—you didn't have to kill him." Her heart twisted as she spoke, and deep down, she felt as though it truly were her fault. When Spottedpaw blinked, the frozen cats around her vanished. She glanced behind her and saw that, much to her dismay, Hawkscar still laid limply on the stony floor.

Another, even more distinct laugh sounded around the cave. The laughter dripped with venomous, rife with malicious intent. Spottedpaw took a shaky breath and turned around, blinking in surprise when she saw a strange, dark-furred tom. His amber eyes seemed to glow in the darkness of the cave.

"It seems you've started yourself along a path that only ends in misery," he sneered. His voice jerked forward a memory of one of her first visions—he was the tom that she saw arguing with Shadestar, and the one that killed Ivorystar. *Crowstar*.

"What do you know?" Spottedpaw snapped back, suddenly finding her courage. "You're a murderer, *you're* the reason the forest is the way it is today. Why should I believe a word you say?" Crowstar stepped towards Hawkscar's lifeless body, flipping him

over so that Spottedpaw could see the fearful expression frozen onto his face.

"I know that you just lost your precious mentor," Crowstar gave a purr of amusement, "And, knowing Deadeye, the ones you hold close are likely next. This path will only lead to death, and you're the one who chose it." Spottedpaw opened her mouth to object, but froze when the smoky-furred tom stalked towards her.

"What are you—" Her voice caught in her throat when the dead leader raised an unsheathed paw to her face, his sharp claws resting threateningly against her skin.

"You asked for this."

Spottedpaw jolted awake with a gasp, her claws grasping desperately at the mossy nest beneath her. The apprentice took a few deep breaths and glanced around the BlazeClan medicine den, relieved to see that she was alone aside from Blueheart soaking balls of moss in the pool. The bluish-grey medicine cat showed no sign of hearing Spottedpaw's thrashing; when she rose to her paws and slowly put her nest back together, he merely flicked an ear.

Hesitantly, Spottedpaw moved to exit the den. A few sunrises had passed since she first arrived, and her shoulder was already healing well enough for her to be active again. She recalled Skyfeather demanding that Spottedpaw remain in the medicine den for further monitoring of the wound. *I can't tell if she wants me to be careful, or if she just distrusts me that much,* she thought to herself. When she emerged into the main camp, she looked around in awe.

A massive rocky wall curved around the outskirts of the camp, as though sheltering it from harsh weather or invaders. Several rocky formations rested along the sides of the camp; brambles and leaves woven near them hinted that they must be the other dens. Along the tallest side of the camp wall was a ledge that led up the wall until it reached a thicker, sturdier ledge in front of a tiny, cave-like formation. On top of this ledge, Heatherstar stood proudly as she spoke to the gathered cats below her. The black-furred leader immediately noticed Spottedpaw's presence.

"You're just in time for my next announcement, Spottedpaw," the leader called down, her blue eyes warm and welcoming. She turned back to the BlazeClan cats, most of whom had turned to inspect Spottedpaw curiously. "As you all know, we've been sheltering this apprentice who fled to us from the Gorge. I've given it a few sunrises of thought and, with much advice from Yellowheart and Blueheart, I have decided to continue sheltering this apprentice here in BlazeClan." Several skeptical murmurs broke out in the crowd immediately, making Spottedpaw's fur heat up self-consciously.

"What if it's a trick by Deadeye?" some cat called out. When cats murmured their agreement, Spottedpaw grew nervous. She wondered if there was any way she could prove that it wasn't some kind of twisted trick.

"I'm willing to take that risk," Heatherstar responded confidently, her blue eyes flashing in the sunlight. "I'd sooner die than turn away a fellow victim of Deadeye's reign of terror. If it means feeding into one of his tricks, then so be it." Though a few cats still exchanged skeptical glances, most began to nod sympathetically. "Since this apprentice will be staying with us, she needs a mentor. Swallowclaw, since you knew both Spottedpaw and her previous mentor, you will be tasked with training her and watching over her." Once more, disagreement erupted from the cats below her.

"He's biased!" Spottedpaw recognized Rockstorm in the crowd. Bouncepool and a light tabby she-cat nodded in agreement, their eyes defiant. "You need to choose someone who isn't likely to lie in her favor."

"I trust her, Rockstorm," a ginger-and-white she-cat spoke up, her tail twitching. "She was at the border patrol when the Gorge first threatened us—and she did her best to hang back and not cause any issues."

"It's true!" Firthistle spoke up, his fluffy tail sweeping the dust beneath him. "And in the battle when Heatherstorm died, she looked just as horrified and disgusted as we all felt. She's not like the rest of them." Spottedpaw shuffled her paws anxiously as discourse broke out in the crowd in the clearing. *I can't even defend*

myself, she thought miserably. *I don't blame them, but this feels so horrible.* Yellowheart stepped out from behind the leader and murmured a few words in her ear; she gave him a nod and lashed her tail.

"That's enough!" Heatherstar snapped over the discord. "If it makes everyone happy, Rockstorm can *help* Swallowclaw oversee the apprentice and her training. Does this satisfy you all?" When a few accepting mutters broke out, Heatherstar gave a confirming nod and swished her tail gracefully. The black she-cat retreated into her den without a word, while Yellowheart remained atop the ledge. Spottedpaw couldn't help but let out a breath of relief at the ultimate decision, realizing that they very well could have turned her away.

Spottedpaw avoided the curious gazes of the BlazeClan cats as they returned to their duties. After a quick glance around the unfamiliar camp, she decided to sit down a short ways away from the medicine den. She was painfully aware of the countless gazes burning into her pelt; while she couldn't blame them for being interested, she wished that they would at least come talk to her instead.

A scuffling sound caught her attention, but when she looked around, she saw nobody nearby. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and slouched until she was laying down on the dusty floor of the camp; the warmth of the sandy earth beneath her felt soothing against her forelegs and side. After a few heartbeats, she heard the noise again.

"You're being so loud!" a squeaky voice hissed from behind her. "She's gonna catch us and eat us!" Spottedpaw didn't have to turn around to know that a few kits must have stalked up behind her. *Eat them?* she thought, feeling oddly amused. *Are those the nursery stories they're told here?*

"Shut up, Bramblekit. You telling me I'm loud is even louder!" The apprentice had to hold back a purr of laughter at the two kits. Spottedpaw snuck a glance at them and saw that a dark brown kit was stalking her tail, her fur standing out awkwardly against the land around them. She started letting the tip of her tail bounce lazily in the sun and, when the little kit pounced, she whisked her

tail away.

The two kits gave startled squeals and ran away, their scrambling paws throwing up dust and sand behind them. Spottedpaw let out a few soft chuckles as she watched the kits scamper off. As they vanished into what could only be the nursery, Spottedpaw began to feel as though she were weighed down by an invisible force. In only a matter of days, her life had been thrown askew, and now she sat in a Clan full of cats she didn't know; cats that, like those kits, likely see her as a dangerous villain. *I'm going to have to work hard to prove myself to them,* she told herself, though she struggled to find much determination within herself.

Approaching footsteps caught her attention once more. Spottedpaw blinked and recognized Firthistle approaching her, his expression soft, yet hesitant. A plump mouse dangled from his jaws, swinging as he padded up.

"Hey," the pale tom murmured awkwardly, setting the prey down at their paws delicately. "I know that a lot of cats are giving you a hard time, but I promise, we don't all think that way. I know that you're not like Deadeye, or those other cats."

"Er . . . thank you," Spottedpaw responded hesitantly, unsure of what to say. She wanted to defend the friends that she had; she wanted to defend *Hawkscar*. As much as she wanted to say it, she knew that the Clan cats' feelings were beyond justified. *Who knows how long Deadeye has terrorized them—Crowstar, too,* she reminded herself sadly. Firthistle nudged the mouse toward her and gave her an awkward nod before padding away.

Spottedpaw slowly began to eat the mouse, her mouth watering when she tasted just how fresh it was. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of cream fur. Her heart jumped to her throat as she snapped her head to look. Deep inside, she found herself hoping that it was Hawkscar—wishing that he had somehow escaped, and had come to join her.

The cat turned around and her heart fell when she realized that it was only Yellowheart. Spottedpaw silently cursed herself for being so silly. Hawkscar was dead—nothing she could say or do

would change that, so why did her mind insist on playing these awful tricks on her?

"You're seeing him in the cats here, aren't you?" Swallowclaw mewed, his deep voice thick with sympathy. Spottedpaw jumped at his arrival and shot him a sheepish glance. "Hawkscar was an amazing cat, but more importantly, he *understood* you. Don't blame yourself for what happened, Spottedpaw. He wanted you safe above everything."

Spottedpaw drew patterns in the earth in front of her with her claws, letting out a soft sigh. "I've been having nightmares," she admitted after a few moments, immediately feeling embarrassed. "I-I mean, I've always had bad dreams, but ever since I woke up here, I've had nightmares about . . . *it."* She finished her sentence awkwardly, unsure of how to form the correct words.

"You've been through something that not many cats have to witness firsthand," Swallowclaw responded without missing a beat, his voice reassuring. "I have no doubt that whatever happened, however it happened, was traumatic beyond description. This kind of reaction is normal, Spottedpaw."

I made this happen, though, Spottedpaw told herself bitterly, though she said nothing aloud. She continued scraping at the ground in front of her, wishing that she could stop feeling this way. She knew that if she had just ignored her dreams, and kept them to herself, she wouldn't be in this position. *Hawkscar would still be alive. I could still talk to Nightpaw, and bicker with Dustpaw. As the list carried on inside her head,* Spottedpaw felt her remorse grow deeper.

"It's okay to feel this way," the dark tabby tom murmured again. His amber eyes were soft as he gazed at the apprentice. "I don't know all of the details, and you don't have to tell me them, but none of this is your fault. Deadeye is a tyrannical, evil cat—this was bound to happen someday, if not to you, then to whoever else upset him that day."

"I guess so," Spottedpaw mumbled slowly. She remembered how his kits had caught greencough, and how Deadeye had seemed visibly upset ever since then. Even still, it was her dreams that gave

him the final shove. Spottedpaw let her gaze wander back to Yellowheart and realized that, while his pelt wasn't the same, he resembled Hawkscar in a way that was almost eerie.

As a more comfortable silence fell over her, she couldn't help but wonder how Swallowclaw knew her mentor so well. *Remember his roots, Heatherstar.* The words resonated clearly within her mind, and so the question surfaced within her; how exactly did these cats know Hawkscar? What exactly *were* his roots? A glance at Swallowclaw was enough to tell her not to ask—his soft gaze had grown sad as he gazed up at the sky, his fluffy brown fur swaying gently in the breeze.

Spottedpaw let out a sigh and rested her head on her paws. *Maybe Shadestar will tell me what I need to know,* she thought, though she knew it wasn't likely. The smoky-furred ancestor had hardly been direct with her thus far. With another gentle sigh, Spottedpaw closed her eyes and let the warm embrace of the sun lead her into a deep sleep.

Chapter 16

Spottedpaw held in a frustrated sigh as she mimicked Swallowclaw's stances. Though some of them she remembered from Hawkscar's training, some were entirely unfamiliar to her. She felt like a brand new apprentice all over again. The only difference between then and now was that this time, her paws weren't sticking out all over the place.

"You're moving like a newborn kit," Rockstorm voiced her deepest insecurities with a condescending tone. "Keep your body lower to the ground and stop scuffing your paws like that! Any prey that you're lucky enough to find would have already fled by now." The smoky-furred warrior flicked his tail disdainfully. Spottedpaw sat upright and gave her chest fur a few embarrassed licks.

"I'm sorry, Rockstorm. I'm trying really hard—"

"Trying really hard doesn't cut it, kit." Spottedpaw bit back her words when she met his cold, yellow gaze. How could he continue to talk to her like that? They'd already had plenty of lessons where Spottedpaw nearly outperformed her new mentors; she couldn't understand how he could remain so cold.

"Of course," Swallowclaw chimed in, his voice dry and monotonous. "It isn't like Spottedpaw is totally relearning how to hunt and battle in an entirely foreign land." Rockstorm flashed a glare at the tabby warrior and flicked his tail once more, though he didn't continue the conversation. Instead, he begrudgingly offered Spottedpaw advice—an instance that rarely occurred.

"When you're stalking your prey here, you have to lift your paws a little higher off the ground," he muttered reluctantly. "Our territory is littered with rocks and pebbles, and if you aren't careful, you'll kick them and alert your quarry." As the warrior spoke, Spottedpaw couldn't help but recall Rocksplash, the coldhearted warrior that mentored her brother.

"Th-Thank you, Rockstorm," Spottedpaw stammered hesitantly, silently hoping that the stormy warrior didn't lash out at her for that, too. He merely fixed her with narrowed eyes, his gaze as harsh as ever.

"Was that so hard, Rockstorm?" Swallowclaw teased facetiously. "I think we've been thorough with our lessons for today. I'm going to escort her back to camp—alone, if you don't mind. Your sharp tongue and critical gaze are enough to make anyone trip up." Rockstorm merely gave a grunt in response and padded away from the training grounds.

Swallowclaw chuckled and led Spottedpaw back towards the camp, his long-furred tail trailing behind him lazily. As they padded through the territory, Spottedpaw tried her best to memorize the land around them. *So there's a big boulder by the training grounds,* she told herself. *Perhaps that abandoned Twoleg nest is nearby.* She didn't dare ask about it yet, in fear of revealing her adventure with Jayleaf. Spottedpaw knew that even Swallowclaw would question that.

When they returned to camp, she saw that the apprentices of BlazeClan sat gathered outside of their den. Swallowclaw promptly led her over to them, leaving Spottedpaw to merely follow in confusion. Upon being approached, the three apprentices fixed them with confused stares.

"Apprentices, this is Spottedpaw. Spottedpaw, these are Smallpaw, Canyonpaw, and Echopaw," Swallowclaw mewed briskly, motioning to the three apprentices respectively. Smallpaw, a black-and-white tom, fixed her with a cold and distrustful glare. The brownish-grey tabby tom, Canyonpaw, refused to meet her gaze—instead, he cast his own gaze to the ground. The third, a sleek black she-cat named Echopaw, sent Spottedpaw a curious glance.

"We know who she is," Smallpaw snapped, his blue eyes flashing in the sunlight. "We never asked for introductions, you know." Spottedpaw held back a gasp at how he spoke to Swallowclaw.

"Hold your tongue," Swallowclaw retorted, glowering at the apprentice. "Blueheart requested that she moves to the apprentices'

den; she'll be sleeping with you three, and I expect you to prepare her a nest and treat her fairly."

Before any of them could respond, Swallowclaw padded off with another harsh glance toward Smallpaw. Spottedpaw watched him wordlessly, unable to express her own shock at the sudden decision. The other apprentices quickly made their own surprise clear to her.

"This is insane!" Smallpaw burst out angrily, lashing his tail. "My dad said that you're a *savage*. How can we even know that you're trustworthy? You could be tricking us for a chance to attack us!"

"Of course I'm trustworthy!" Spottedpaw shot back, taken aback by his outburst. She knew to expect some poor treatment, but aside from Rockstorm, Smallpaw was the first to be so blunt about his feelings. "I've been training here for almost a half moon!"

Smallpaw narrowed his eyes and took a few steps forward. When he stopped, he shifted forward, as if trying to tower over Spottedpaw. Spottedpaw moved to do the same, then thought better of it. Instead, she sat down and did her best to look indifferent to his actions. When she did so, Canyonpaw stepped forward, his thicker pelt rippling with the movement.

"Jayleaf said that she's trustworthy," he mewed meekly. "He said he saw her in the battle, and that she fought our dad. She didn't use her claws until he cornered her!" Spottedpaw blinked in surprise, remembering how Rockstorm had cornered her in the battle on the border. *These are Rockstorm's kits?* Smallpaw's behavior suddenly made sense to her. *Of course he's Rockstorm's kit. He acts just as entitled!* Spottedpaw knew better than to voice her thoughts, as much as she wished she could.

"Mother says that she's good, too," Echopaw chimed in, though her voice was thick with disdain. "She even spoke out against father at the Clan meeting the other day! We all know how he can become so attached to his pride." Canyonpaw nodded in agreement, while Smallpaw huffed and turned away from his sister.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he muttered reluctantly. "We've been training for so long, we'll be warriors soon, anyway! We won't have

to put up with your Gorge stench for long." Spottedpaw rolled her eyes and tried not to take offense. Echopaw spoke up again, preventing her from defending herself.

"How long have *you* been an apprentice, Spottedpaw?" the she-cat asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Er . . . ." Spottedpaw leaned back a bit, unsure of the sudden interest Echopaw placed in her. When she didn't respond, the three apprentices exchanged a few glances.

"You know, we might be more willing to trust you if you opened up a little bit," Smallpaw mumbled, inspecting his claws as if he held no interest in Spottedpaw. An image of her own brother, Dustpaw, flashed through her mind, covering the space where Smallpaw sat—with a few surprised blinks, it vanished.

"Yeah!" Echopaw nodded eagerly, stepping towards Spottedpaw. "You can be open with us, Spottedpaw!" Spottedpaw let out a quick breath, reluctantly deciding to tell them a bit of her past.

"Well, my apprentice ceremony came earlier than most. Some of my campmates were surprised by the sudden announcement," she murmured slowly, remembering how her own parents had seemed rather indifferent compared to some of her campmates. "I didn't attend my first Gathering for a few moons after my apprenticeship —I was the first apprentice allowed to attend in several seasons, actually. I remember when Deadeye announced me to the Clans, many were surprised by how small I was."

A brisk air swept through the camp, reminding Spottedpaw of that the warm season she felt so familiar with was long gone. She knew that she would never again be able to sit in the forest and listen to the songs of the creatures that roamed; she would never be able to enjoy the thick breeze above the river, or let its roaring lull her senses.

"I don't know how long apprenticeships are in the Clans, but I know that despite being an apprentice for several moons, I still had many moons to go before I earned a warrior ceremony in the Gorge. The warriors told us that the long moons of training helped to

ensure our loyalty to him." Spottedpaw looked at the sky above them. It was clear aside from a few stray clouds traveling in the wind, and despite the chilly wind of leaf-fall, the sun still threatened to bore through her fur.

"What was Deadeye like?" Canyonpaw burst out suddenly, surprising all three apprentices. Spottedpaw looked back to them and saw that their gazes were more curious than ever, an interested fire burning in their eyes.

"I- I don't know . . . ." Spottedpaw mumbled, not sure if it was right to share so much when some of her friends still considered the cave their home. A familiar grey tabby padded up to the group of apprentices, his slightly fluffy fur ruffling in the wind.

"You don't have to say anything that you don't want to, Spottedpaw," Jayleaf reminded her, his amber eyes as kind as ever. "Though, I agree with the apprentices; insight from someone who actually lived there and escaped would be more than interesting." Spottedpaw hesitated once more, but when she met Jayeaf's reassuring gaze, she gave a soft sigh. The young warrior's presence never failed to put her at ease.

Spottedpaw looked at each of the apprentices in front of her and noticed that their whiskers were twitching eagerly. Their curiosity amused her, if only a little bit, and she held back a chuckle as she caved to their requests. *I'm sure they've all heard horrible tales from their elders about his tyranny,* she told herself thoughtfully. *I can't blame them for being so curious. I would be, too.*

"Many of us in the Gorge harbor feelings that are similar to how the Clans feel about him. We just . . . aren't able to be open about it. When he looks at you, this . . . this slimy, itchy feeling will overcome you. It's such an overwhelmingly uncomfortable feeling," she started, shuddering as she remembered meeting the one-eyed tom's piercing gaze. Spottedpaw ignored the urge to shake her pelt free of the feeling and let her gaze drift away from the apprentices.

"One of your warriors mentioned how I stayed back when there was an argument between our patrols. A warrior, Snowface, reported that I wasn't aggressive enough, that I was trembling at the

thought of the situation escalating. As a result, Deadeye called me into his den and told me not to let it happen again. He—" Spottedpaw broke off as she recalled the confrontation, and the words the leader had uttered. "He pushed me down and cut off my breathing with his paws on my throat. He said that if it happened again, there would be consequences." The golden-furred apprentice lifted a paw to her throat, grimacing as she felt the scar left on her skin. After a moment of hesitation, Spottedpaw shook her head and continued speaking. Now that she had started, she felt the words overflowing inside her mind.

"Not long ago, an elder caught whitecough. Our healer said it was early for the sickness to show itself, and promised that it would be no issue. The sickness turned into greencough and quickly spread to the kits. Deadeye's kits." Spottedpaw paused and closed her eyes, ignoring how her heart fluttered uneasily in her chest. "Instead of allowing the healer to treat them, he gave them their apprentice ceremony, insisting that his bloodline will keep them strong. When I last saw them, they were skin and bones; I'm no healer, but it looked bad." The three apprentices let out a series of surprised gasps as Spottedpaw spoke. Even Smallpaw looked startled, his harsh gaze now widened in surprise.

"There was another apprentice. Brownpaw. He was my best friend's brother. It's common for warriors to train their apprentices at Boulderfall, an outcrop of sharp stones and boulders in the forest. He fell in a freak training accident and wrenched his shoulder; ever since, he was afraid to leave our caves." Spottedpaw took a deep breath and tried not to recall the memories of his death, though her fur started to stand on end. "Deadeye forced him to leave the caves, and as they were returning, Brownpaw fell off of the ledges and into the Gorge. He was labeled a coward, and we weren't allowed to hold a vigil for him."

Despite her attempts to keep the memory at bay, the death of the apprentice resurfaced into her mind—along with the death of Hawkscar. As much as she wanted to continue, she wasn't sure she could handle recounting the events of the night that she escaped. Spottedpaw cleared her throat uncomfortably and looked at the apprentices, and at Jayleaf, expectantly, when they only stared at

her in astonishment. When she opened her mouth to speak again, Smallpaw finally spoke up.

"I would have fought a terrible cat like that, no problem!" he boasted, puffing his chest out. When he met Spottedpaw's gaze, his eyes became harsh and narrowed once more. *Just like Rockstorm,* she reminded herself in exasperation.

"As if," Canyonpaw muttered and rolled his eyes at his brother. "You're such a mouse-heart when it comes to fighting!" Smallpaw swiped a paw over Canyonpaw's ear, and the two began to tumble in a play-fight. As the siblings bickered and rolled around, Spottedpaw sent a glance at Jayleaf, who'd been looking at her sympathetically.

"Did *you* ever fight him, Spottedpaw?" Echopaw asked suddenly, leaning forward curiously and ignoring her noisy brothers.

"Well, of course no—" Spottedpaw started to speak quickly, but Echopaw cut her off. The apprentice's eagerness, though charming, was almost overwhelming.

"When our patrol found you, you had a really nasty wound on your shoulder! Your entire arm was covered in blood! Did you get it from fighting Deadeye?" Almost as soon as she finished speaking, Echopaw gasped and let out another barrage of questions. "Did you win?! How does he fight—is he good, even though he only has one eye? He's so scary looking!" Spottedpaw opened her mouth to speak again but didn't know what to say.

"That's enough questions," Jayleaf butted in, stepping between Spottedpaw and the other apprentices briefly. He sent Spottedpaw an apologetic glance and turned back to the three siblings. "Go ahead and start gathering moss for her nest—Canyonpaw, stop bickering with Smallpaw and get going. You guys got the storytime you wanted, now be productive."

When the apprentices rushed off to obey his orders, Jayleaf let out a chuckle and sat back down. He gave Spottedpaw another apologetic look.

"I'm sorry if any of that made you uncomfortable," he mewed awkwardly. "Sometimes those apprentices just don't know when to stop. I swear, you'd think they weren't taught any manners." Jayleaf finished speaking with another soft chuckle.

"It's okay. Thank you for stepping in when Echopaw got carried away," Spottedpaw murmured, ducking her head in embarrassment. "They remind me of some of the cats I knew back home, actually. It's . . . nice, in a way." Jayleaf let out a warm laugh when Spottedpaw said that.

"Well, it makes sense," Jayleaf murmured. "I know that not everyone from the Gorge is . . . well, like Deadeye. *You* being here proves that. I'm sure there are some really nice cats there, too." Spottedpaw blinked gratefully at him and flicked her tail.

"I'm glad someone feels that way. It feels like almost everyone here looks at me different—I get it, I really do, but I *hate* it." Spottedpaw let out a sigh, perking her ears when the other apprentices came back into sight.

"Just give them time. If you can show them that you're trustworthy, they'll warm up to you, I promise." Jayleaf shot her a final reassuring glance and padded off as the three apprentices returned, each carrying some moss.

"This is for you!" Echopaw murmured around a mouthful of moss. "Come with us, and I'll help you set up your nest!" Spottedpaw hesitantly rose to her paws and followed them into the den, ignoring the half-glares that Smallpaw insisted on giving her. *Just pretend it's Dustpaw,* she told herself. *Ignore it, maybe he'll stop.* Spottedpaw held back an irritated sigh and looked around the den slowly.

"This would be an excellent spot for a nest!" Canyonpaw dropped his bundle of moss near a small groove in the ground. Spottedpaw padded forward slowly and inspected it. With a hesitant nod, Spottedpaw gathered the moss the siblings had collected and made a nest out of it. She snuck a glance at the apprentices as she did so, silently willing her wary thoughts away. *Maybe this won't be so bad,* she told herself. *They seem . . . nice*

enough. Jayleaf is probably right—they'll trust me more if I can just prove myself to them. Spottedpaw just needed to figure out how she was supposed to do that.

Chapter 17

"I know that the Gorge had its own set of rules and codes for you to follow, but here, things are a little different." Swallowclaw swept his tail along the sandy floor of the camp as he recited the rules that are in place for apprentices of the Clans. Spottedpaw nodded absently as she listened to her new mentor, struggling to pay attention to him. The sun rested high in the sky, though it provided little warmth compared to when she first woke up here some sunrises ago. Even when it had been sunhigh, the warmth it provided was weak.

Though the breeze from before was absent, a faint chill hung in the air, threatening the cats with leafbare. Spottedpaw wondered if whitecough would strike BlazeClan as badly as it had hit the Gorge; the last thing the Clans needed was sickened or dead cats, considering the ever-growing threat from Deadeye. He made no move to wage a war yet—according to the warriors, the border with the Gorge had become oddly quiet. The news gave Spottedpaw a dark and ominous feeling.

"Apprentices must also visit Starfalls once during their apprenticeship." The mention of the sacred place jerked Spottedpaw's attention back to the warrior. She perked her ears, remembering how Hawkscar mentioned it when she revealed the dreams she'd received. "They might experience nothing special there, and that's okay. Some cats simply don't develop a powerful bond with StarClan. In addition, our ancestors are known for being vague, and rarely truly reveal themselves to those who are not medicine cats or leaders."

"You'd be lucky to have a connection at all, considering Deadeye's contempt for them," Rockstorm chimed in, his amber eyes, though as harsh as ever, glittered considerately.

"That doesn't mean anything, Rockstorm," Swallowclaw chided, his tone cool. His eyes flashed fiercely, but he said nothing more to the warrior. "Spottedpaw, you're due to visit the Starfalls yourself

soon. To prepare for it, apprentices and their mentors will take traveling herbs. The Starfalls is farther away than most apprentices are accustomed to, and it's safer to take traveling herbs so you don't grow weary or hungry along the way."

Spottedpaw said nothing in response. She only nodded, thinking of what Rockstorm said to her. If what he said was true, perhaps she should consider herself lucky that Shadestar has visited her so much. *He sure is persistent,* she thought to herself, letting her gaze drift away as Swallowclaw recited more rules. *He's even taken me directly to StarClan's territory . . . maybe I* am *lucky.* She thought back to her starry-pathed journeys through the ancestral forest, and how both Shadestar and Ivorystar had spoken to her—and of her countless horrible, foreboding nightmares.

Lost in her thought, Spottedpaw hadn't noticed when Heatherstar approached the trio. The black-furred she-cat cleared her throat deliberately, catching their attention.

"Hello, Heatherstar," Rockstorm and Swallowclaw chimed together. Spottedpaw bowed her head to the leader, feeling embarrassed when she realized she forgot to verbally greet her.

"Swallowclaw, I trust you've told Spottedpaw about her upcoming trip to Starfalls?" When the brown tabby warrior nodded, Heatherstar sat down and continued. "I've spoken with Blueheart and Skyfeather, and they feel that since tonight is the half moon, it'd be easier to simply have you journey with them to Starfalls." Swallowclaw blinked in surprise, while Rockstorm jumped to his paws in defiance.

"Apprentices are supposed to be escorted by their mentors," Rockstorm hissed through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowed. "Why would you allow one—especially a previous Gorge apprentice—to accompany our medicine cats?" Heatherstar fixed the senior warrior with a cool glare.

"You know better than to challenge my decisions, Rockstorm," Heatherstar mewed with a level tone, her twitching tail the only evidence of her irritation. "However, since you seem to feel she poses a threat to our medicine cats, I'll explain this simply. How

would the other Clans feel if they found out two warriors were escorting a Gorge apprentice through their territory?"

"But all apprentices are permitted to journey to Starfalls once—"

"Deadeye has proven he disregards the code that the Clans follow—in turn, most warriors assume any cats from the Gorge will fall in line with him. Medicine cats are sworn to a different code than the warriors, and would be more likely to understand if they see Blueheart and Skyfeather with a Gorge *refugee.*" Heatherstar put emphasis on the word *refugee,* as if reminding Rockstorm that Spottedpaw no longer lived by Deadeye's rules. Spottedpaw shuffled her paws awkwardly when Rockstorm cast her a scrutinizing glance.

"What she says makes sense," Swallowclaw spoke slowly, as though processing the idea. "Usually, it's the mentors that accompany their apprentice to Starfalls, but this certainly is a special circumstance where it would be sensible to make . . . exceptions."

"Correct. I also need both of you here in case Deadeye makes a move. Swallowclaw, you're one of my wisest warriors; I want you present for advice in the event of an attack. Rockstorm, you're one of the best fighters here. You'll be on the frontlines defending us if things go awry." Heatherstar turned to Spottedpaw and narrowed her blue eyes. "As for you—find Blueheart and Skyfeather. They'll prepare you for the journey to Starfalls. I don't think I need to remind you to listen to what they tell you."

Spottedpaw gave a swift nod and turned away from her mentors and her new leader. Hesitantly, she approached the medicine den. She paused before entering, listening to ensure their presence. When she heard rustling and muffled voices coming from inside the den, Spottedpaw nosed her way inside. Once inside, she spotted Blueheart and Skyfeather rummaging through their stocks of herbs.

Spottedpaw took a closer look at their paws and saw that they weren't just rummaging through herbs—they were sorting out particular herbs and setting a select few in a delicate pile. *Those must be the traveling herbs,* she mused, taking a few steps closer to

them.

"Your herbs will be ready shortly, Spottedpaw," Blueheart mewed without looking up, his tone curt. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise.

"A-Alright, Blueheart. Thank you," she stammered in response. Spottedpaw padded up behind them quietly and peeked at the herbs curiously, wondering how they'd taste.

"Don't you know about personal space?" Blueheart snapped, his tail twitching in irritation.

"Oh, let her be curious, Blueheart," Skyfeather spoke, a nervous chuckle erupting from her. "I'm sure she's excited to see Starfalls." Blueheart only gave a grunt in response and continued putting together the herbs.

Spottedpaw shuffled closer to Skyfeather, peeking around her to watch them bundle the herbs together. *Blueheart always seems so grumpy,* she thought to herself, casting the elder medicine cat a half-interested glance. She noticed how, though he seemed healthy otherwise, his pelt was disheveled and dull. The sight reminded her of Molestrike, before she got sickly. *He must be around her age. I wonder if medicine cats retire like warriors do?*

"The Starfalls is quite far away," Blueheart muttered as he prepared the herbs. "We'll have to set out right away—it's already well past sunhigh—almost sunset, and the moon rises faster the closer we get to leafbare."

"Is it really that far away?" Spottedpaw asked, wonder filling her mind. If the spot was as sacred as they claimed, it must look magnificent.

"It's far enough that we have to leave before it gets too dark," Skyfeather chimed in, pushing the traveling herbs to Spottedpaw. "Here, eat up—they're going to taste bitter, but you'll get used to it."

Spottedpaw gave the herbs an uncertain glance and went to eat them. The bitter flavor overwhelmed her taste buds, and she

cringed. *It's just a few herbs,* she reminded herself. *This will make the journey easier.* Spottedpaw did her best to ignore the poor taste, swallowing the herbs reluctantly. The two medicine cats ushered her out of the den, and then towards the exit of the camp. Spottedpaw looked to the sky and saw that, to her surprise, the sun had nearly set.

"Stay close to us," Blueheart ordered as they left the camp. "Don't interact with the other medicine cats, and *don't* do anything to make a fool out of yourself. The last thing we need is any kind of tension between the medicine cats."

"The boundaries and loyalties of the medicine cats are different from the warriors," Skyfeather retorted with a roll of her eyes. She sent Spottedpaw an exasperated glance, at which the apprentice only smiled sheepishly. "We would never attack one another, nor would we betray each other."

"The threat of the Gorge makes everything unpredictable," Blueheart snapped, flicking his tail tip irritably. His tone sounded almost stressed, in a way, and Spottedpaw felt a wave of guilt overcome her. She knew that the Clans' suffering wasn't her fault; Deadeye and Crowstar were to blame. Even so, she wanted to help the Clans find peace and safety.

As they traveled across the dry, barren BlazeClan territory, Spottedpaw kept herself alert. She noticed how the land here felt drastically different than what she felt at the Gorge. Before long, they were nearing the treeline that marked the sacred Gathering spot. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise when she realized just how much smaller BlazeClan territory was compared to the Gorge.

"The territories here seem so much smaller," she wondered aloud as the medicine cats led her over an unfamiliar border.

"You can thank Deadeye for that," Skyfeather mewed, a hint of sadness in her tone. "He constantly pressures us for more land; if we don't do as he says, he threatens us with war."

"I remember seeing that behavior." Spottedpaw gave a slow nod and sniffed the border curiously. There was a mixture of scents she

didn't recognize; she knew that they must be the other Clans' scent markers, though she couldn't recall their names.

"This is the border between RushClan and NightClan," Skyfeather informed her, using her tail to point in the direction of the corresponding Clan. "They haven't lost as much territory as us, and they've both been pretty generous in making sure that both BlazeClan and SwiftClan have the herbs and prey that they need. RushClan has even allowed us to travel to the river for fish and water if we need to, and offered to teach us how to fish."

"Careful," Blueheart called over his shoulder. "The rivers are still running high. If the currents are low enough, we might be able to avoid the river entirely."

Spottedpaw said nothing, while Skyfeather gave a hum of acknowledgment. As they padded through the unfamiliar territory, Spottedpaw noted that to the left—NightClan territory—pine trees covered the ground thickly. On the other side, she could hear the faint babble of a river, and imagined that the cats of RushClan were well-adjusted to the presence of it.

They finally stopped, and Spottedpaw assumed they were near the Starfalls. A gentle mist shrouded the forest and shrubbery around them, carrying with it a soothing chill. The sound of rushing water enticed her to move forward, but Blueheart stopped her with his tail.

"We wait for the other medicine cats to arrive," he instructed plainly. "Especially since this is your first visit to Starfalls." Spottedpaw noddedobediently and sat down next to the two BlazeClan medicine cats. The moon had already started rising when other medicine cats appeared.

The first was a black tom with pale green eyes. In the moonlight, Spottedpaw noticed the faintest hints of stripes—barely darker than his pelt.

"Good evening, Tigerflight," Blueheart murmured, dipping his head in greeting. The unfamiliar medicine cat said nothing, lowering his head in a greeting. His pale green eyes rested on

Spottedpaw for a moment, though he displayed no signs of recognition. Tigerflight sat down a little ways away from the three BlazeClan cats, hardly giving them a second glance after his initial greeting.

"Greetings!" a silver tabby called out as she appeared with a smaller, orange tabby tom.

"Hello, Moonlight," Blueheart responded, his eyes friendly. Skyfeather rushed forward to greet the newest arrivals.

"Hey Moonlight and Sunclaw!" she greeted happily, her dark, fluffy tail waving in excitement. Spottedpaw shifted awkwardly as the cats greeted each other affectionately. She grew even more awkward when their gazes shifted to her and a hint of recognition flashed in their eyes.

Before they could speak, the nearby undergrowth rustled. A white she-cat with vibrant bluish-green eyes emerged, along with a small brown tabby tom with golden eyes. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise when she saw him—she recalled how he had been staring at her after Deadeye threatened Heatherstar, an action that cut her last Gathering short. Their gazes swept over the gathered cats affectionately, stopping once they noticed Spottedpaw.

"Oh? Who's this?" the white she-cat spoke first, her ears angled forward curiously. Spottedpaw shuffled her paws anxiously, hoping that none of them recognized her from the Gathering.

"A new apprentice who must visit Starfalls," Blueheart responded, his tone brisk. He stood and prepared to step beyond the foliage that hid their sacred spot from view. "Having her journey with us was simpler than worrying about sending another warrior away from the camp."

"Hold on," the brown tabby stepped toward Spottedpaw, inspecting her closely. "This is that apprentice from the Gorge that was so tiny!" He exchanged a dark glance with the white she-cat that he accompanied, though his tone only carried surprise and a hint of curiosity. The other medicine cats bristled defensively. Blueheart didn't say a word, though he stopped in his tracks and

fixed them with a cool gaze.

"Don't get the wrong idea, Muddapple!" Skyfeather burst out, stepping forward quickly. "She's a refugee—Deadeye tried to have her killed, but she escaped and came to us for help." Spottedpaw shrunk away from the curious and frightened gazes of the medicine cats. *I'm not like them,* she pleaded internally. *Please stop looking at me like that!* She glanced at Blueheart and saw that he'd fixed Skyfeather with a near-furious glare.

"If what you say is true, then perhaps we should all relax," the white she-cat spoke up, her tone soft. "If she truly came seeking help, there's no reason for any of us to deny her." When a murmur of agreement rose from the cats, Blueheart gave a sigh that surprised Spottedpaw.

"Thank you, Brightpelt," he grumbled. "Can we dream with StarClan now? It's nearly moonhigh." His eyes flashed in annoyance, though Spottedpaw thought she detected a faint shimmer of relief hidden in his gaze. The medicine cats collectively nodded and, one by one, began to push through the barrier of undergrowth. Skyfeather beckoned to Spottedpaw with her tail, and the apprentice hesitantly padded forward, her steps suddenly shaky.

Up until this point, she'd been excited to see the Starfalls for the first time. Now that she was finally about to see it, a sense of anxiety formed in her belly. The mist that shrouded around them wrapped itself around Spottedpaw's frame, as if it meant to comfort her. Without a word, she swallowed her anticipation and nosed her way through the wall of plants.

Spottedpaw nearly froze in her path when she was faced with the Starfalls. A series of small waterfalls led a stream into a pool that was illuminated by the stars above. The mist rising from where the waterfall made contact with the pool shimmered in the night air, resembling the starry formations that they called Silverpelt. The sound of the water crashing reassured Spottedpaw, in some inexplicable way.

"Come on, Spottedpaw." Skyfeather's encouraging voice rang out, drawing Spottedpaw's attention back to the medicine cats. They'd

all moved to gather at the edge of the pool, and now they fixed her with expectant gazes. Spottedpaw slowly made her way to the pool and stared down into it, entranced by its shimmery surface.

"Touch your nose to it," Muddapple's soft mew in her ear startled her. When Spottedpaw jumped at the suddenness, he gave a soft chuckle. "And then close your eyes."

Spottedpaw refused to let her anxiety get the best of her. She took a deep breath and let it out quickly before crouching at the water's edge. *I can do this. It's only a totally-magical pool of water,* she told herself. Slowly, she lowered her muzzle to the water and closed her eyes, struggling to ignore the shock that coursed through her body when her nose met the water.

When Spottedpaw opened her eyes, she found herself in a warm, sun-filled clearing. She looked around slowly, freezing when she found herself meeting the ever-friendly gaze of Shadestar once more.

"You sure like to approach me pretty blatantly—" Spottedpaw commented, thinking of what Swallowclaw had told her, "—you know, considering StarClan's reputation for hiding themselves away from everyone except leaders and medicine cats. What are you here for, anyways? Did you call me here to give me some more vague advice?"

Shadestar said nothing, though his mouth twitched as though he held back an amused smile. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and approached him slowly; deep in his hazy blue eyes, there was a twinkle of mirth. The apprentice sighed and sat down, deciding to retry her approach. *It's no use getting short with him,* she thought. *I doubt he has a choice in any of this, either. He just wants to restore his Clan.* Then, she remembered the cats of the Gorge, and those who had lost their lives.

"Did Brownpaw make it to you?" Spottedpaw asked. "I told Nightpaw you could reach him, but I don't know how true it was—"

"Brownpaw made it to us just fine," Shadestar reassured her, a hint of amusement lingering in his tone. "Don't worry, he's happy

here."

"What about Hawkscar?" Spottedpaw queried, unable to keep the desperation from her tone. "I– I know he didn't make it out of the Gorge alive. He must have made it to you, right?" When Shadestar only stared at her in response, Spottedpaw felt her heart drop.

"I can't give you all the answers, Spottedpaw," Shadestar began, his tone leveling out. "I can only help guide you to your destiny." With that sentence, frustration immediately bubbled up within Spottedpaw. *Destiny?* She didn't care about that—what she cared about was her mentor, and whether he made it to StarClan.

"My destiny?" Spottedpaw echoed aloud, the frustration in her voice nearly tangible. "What if I don't want any of this? I didn't *ask* for this. I lost my home. My mentor *died* trying to keep me alive. I didn't want any of this to happen!" She tore at the grass beneath her, growing agitated at the thought of the misfortune that seemed to follow her.

Shadestar blinked, his gaze unwavering. "Deadeye's reign will guarantee nothing but death and suffering, Spottedpaw. Soon, he'll be choosing his heir." The starry-furred leader closed his eyes, and Spottedpaw blinked in confusion.

"His heir?"

"It's a tradition that Crowstar started many seasons ago. The regent is only around to help keep order. Just like Crowstar chose Deadeye, Deadeye will soon choose someone to follow in his footsteps. Be careful of who you trust, and watch your back wherever you go. Those who are in the Gorge are out of your reach for now, and though you can still help them, many will go out of their way to see you fall."

Shadestar looked up to the sky as the sun retreated, darkening the sky. Stars appeared, only to spin in circles. The movement nearly made Spottedpaw dizzy as she watched it. When they slowed to a stop, Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes at the shapes they formed.

The stars formed the outlines of three cats; two larger, more

menacing looking cats on the outside, sheltering a smaller one in between them. As Spottedpaw inspected it, a feeling of dread filled her. There was a threatening glow coming from the three cats. The smallest cat in the middle glowed the brightest, the shine increasing the longer that Spottedpaw stared at it. Something felt familiar about the cats she saw in the sky, but before she could place her familiarity, the gleam of the stars overwhelmed her and blurred her vision.

Spottedpaw screwed her eyes shut to avoid the blinding glare. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself struggling to her paws at the Starfalls. She reeled backwards from the starry pool in front of her, trying to compose herself before the medicine cats around her noticed her behavior. She didn't know what the image of three cats was supposed to tell her—clearly she needed to worry about more than just Deadeye, but *three cats?* She had no idea who to even watch out for.

"Spottedpaw, are you okay?" Spottedpaw blinked a few times and met the eyes of the medicine cats. Brightpelt and Muddapple had fixed her with intrigued gazes, while Skyfeather looked concerned. Spottedpaw glanced at Blueheart and felt herself wither when she saw that he looked downright embarrassed.

"Y-Yeah," she stammered, ducking her head in embarrassment. "I just . . . er . . . got startled by the water. Yeah, that's all." Spottedpaw cringed internally at how she stumbled over her words. *They don't buy that at all,* she told herself crossly when she noticed Muddapple and Brightpelt exchanging skeptical glances. To her surprise, the white-furred medicine cat stepped forward.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed over," Brightpelt reassured her, her turquoise eyes glimmering with amusement. "Not many apprentices are prepared for the feeling they get when they interact with the water." Spottedpaw breathed out a whisper of gratitude and raised her head to meet Blueheart's gaze.

The blue-grey tom shook out his pelt and stepped forward, beckoning to Skyfeather and Spottedpaw with his tail. The rest of the medicine cats began to separate with their Clanmates as well, whispering farewells to one another.

"Until the next half moon!" Skyfeather called out cheerily, while Blueheart only grunted and led them away from the Starfalls. The trio padded along the border carefully without sharing many words with one another.

"I'm sorry if I made things weird," Spottedpaw blurted out once they reached the barren BlazeClan territory. She hated the awkward silence that rested over them. "I tried to attract less attention, but those two medicine cats recognized me right away."

"Don't worry about it," Skyfeather mewed before Blueheart could snap out a response. "Brightpelt and Muddapple were acting weird, anyways. It isn't your fault." Spottedpaw let out a relieved breath, though she noticed that Blueheart's tail twitched quickly as they traveled.

Once they returned to the BlazeClan camp, Spottedpaw wasted no time in rushing to the apprentices' den. Once inside, she carefully stepped around the other sleeping apprentices and collapsed into her nest. Exhaustion crept up on her quickly and soon, she was engulfed in a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 18

Spottedpaw sniffed the air, desperately searching for a hint of nearby prey. For the first time since she arrived in BlazeClan, she'd been permitted to leave with a patrol—a hunting patrol, no less. *This is the first time I've been out without someone breathing down my back,* she thought happily. Spottedpaw blinked when she detected a hint of rabbit; quickly, she fell into a hunter's crouch, carefully making her way towards the source of the scent.

I've got you now! she thought triumphantly when she saw a rabbit crouching by a lone tree. A few more steps forward, and she'd be close enough to leap at her prey. The rabbit twitched its ears and lifted its head, as if it had caught on to her presence. *Oh, no you don't!* Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and leaped at the rabbit. Her prey took off in a sprint, but it was too late; Spottedpaw caught her prey easily and dealt it a swift blow.

When she looked up, she realized that the border with the Gorge Gorge wasn't far off. Casually, Spottedpaw sat down and examined the not-so distant forest line, wondering what her old campmates were up to. *I hope Nightpaw and Riverpaw are okay,* she thought absentmindedly as her gaze drifted along the border. She'd never forgive herself if something happened to her brother or her friend—especially not after Hawkscar's death.

Over the border, a twig snapped, sending birds fluttering through the trees. Spottedpaw snapped her gaze to what she thought was the source of the noise, though she saw nothing but the forest. When she heard nothing else after a few moments, she shrugged and turned around to continue her hunting.

"Hey, Spottedpaw!" Jayleaf appeared without a sound to warn her of his presence. Spottedpaw nearly jumped out of her fur, though she recovered quickly.

"Hey, Jayleaf," she greeted, bowing her head. "Are we regrouping already? I've only caught this rabbit . . . ."

"Yeah, Smallpaw's warrior ceremony is today! The others sent me to fetch you, we're returning to camp early," the tom chirped, glancing at the rabbit. "That rabbit is huge! Come on, let's get back to camp. Swallowclaw will be proud of your catch, even if that's all you got." Spottedpaw gave her chest a few self-conscious licks before grabbing the rabbit and following Jayleaf back to their patrol.

When Swallowclaw caught sight of Spottedpaw and her catch, she saw that pride flashed in his eyes. She tried to push away her insecurities—even if it was only a rabbit, she did well for her first time hunting alone! Jayleaf gathered his own catches—a thrush and some kind of lizard—and the patrol began to travel back to their camp.

Once they arrived at the camp, Spottedpaw saw that a small crowd had already formed beneath Heatherstar's ledge. She followed Jayleaf to the fresh-kill pile, and the two of them set their catches on the top. The grey warrior padded to the edge of the crowd and, after a moment of hesitation, Spottedpaw followed him.

"I still feel like I barely know anyone here," she admitted, half-embarrassed by the fact. "It's a little embarrassing to just approach them, though."

Jayleaf let out a chuckle and sent her a sideways glance. "I've noticed; you *do* stand out a bit, you know. They're warming up to you, though," he added quickly when Spottedpaw grew visibly flustered.

"That's relieving, at least," Spottedpaw responded with a short sigh. "I'm just glad that I have you and Swallowclaw to help out. I know Rockstorm still thinks poorly of me, and he isn't alone in that."

"Who cares what he thinks? He's almost as cranky as Blueheart!" Jayleaf snorted and nudged the apprentice playfully before glancing around the crowd. Spottedpaw let out a soft laugh and nodded in agreement. "You know, you've gotten a few admirers, too." The friendly warrior flicked his tail to the other side of the clearing, though his gaze rested back on Spottedpaw. She followed where he

pointed with his tail and spotted Firthistle and Bouncepool sitting together. When she met Firthistle's green gaze, the pale tabby tom quickly looked away and Bouncepool started snickering, his body visibly trembling from the effort of hiding it.

"He doesn't even know me," Spottedpaw thought aloud, pulling her gaze away from them two warriors. "What is there to like, anyways? I'm just . . . me. I'm nothing special." She cringed a bit, trying to imagine why anyone would be interested in her.

"Don't sell yourself short," Jayleaf retorted playfully. "You're strong—you escaped the Gorge, for StarClan's sake! Until now, whenever someone tried to leave, they'd mysteriously vanish, or show up dead in the middle of one of the Clans' territories overnight. You've been working hard to prove yourself, too!" Spottedpaw scoffed, her heart dropping as she thought of her escape again.

"I only got out because Hawkscar sacrificed himself for me," she muttered softly, feeling her heart twist at the pain of the memory. "I couldn't let it be for nothing."

"Even so, not everyone would have had the willpower to do what you did. You took the hope he gave you and you *took flight.* It's admirable." Jayleaf shot her a reassuring glance, affection swimming in his golden-amber eyes. "Especially to me. When I first met you, you were this tiny, skittish apprentice, barely old enough to leave the nursery. Look at yourself now!"

Spottedpaw forced a soft smile in response when his words comforted her. *Perhaps he's right,* she told herself thoughtfully. *Maybe I'm just letting what happened in the Gorge hold me back.* When she considered moving past it, she found herself horrified by the idea. Spottedpaw knew it would mean moving past the death of Hawkscar. Until she knew that he was safe in StarClan, she wouldn't be able to let go.

A yowl from the ledge above the clearing caught the attention of the Clan. Spottedpaw looked up and saw Heatherstar and Yellowheart perched beside one another, their eyes glowing with pride.

"BlazeClan, I've called you before me to witness one of the proudest moments of a warrior's life. Smallpaw, step forward." The black-and-white tom stepped forward, visibly shaking from excitement. Spottedpaw glanced around for his siblings and, to her surprise, saw that they were sitting outside the apprentices' den. She briefly wondered why they weren't becoming warriors with him, but quickly decided she'd ask about it after the ceremony.

"I, Heatherstar, leader of BlazeClan, call upon our warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to learn the ways of the code we follow, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn. Smallpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even if it demands you sacrifice your life?"

"I do!" Smallpaw's voice echoed off the walls of the camp, and his eyes shone with anticipation.

"Then by the powers of StarClan vested in me, I give you your warrior name. Smallpaw, from this point on you will be known as Smallmoon. StarClan honors your loyalty and determination, and we welcome you as a full warrior of BlazeClan." As she spoke, Heatherstar slowly climbed down from the ledge. She padded forward slowly and rested her muzzle on Smallmoon's head; in return, the new warrior licked her shoulder.

"Smallmoon! Smallmoon!" The cats in the camp began cheering his new name, his siblings' voices ringing out louder than any other in the camp.

Afterwards, the crowd began to disperse. Spottedpaw remained next to Jayleaf, watching as Smallmoon rushed to Canyonpaw and Echopaw, and the three of them pranced around in celebration.

"How come he became a warrior before them?" Spottedpaw asked the warrior next to her. It seemed odd for one sibling to be finished with their training before the rest.

"Canyonpaw and Echopaw grew very ill before their apprentice ceremonies," Jayleaf explained without missing a beat, as if he expected the question. "Their ceremonies were postponed as a

result, so they still have a couple moons of training before they earn their warrior names." Spottedpaw nodded slowly in understanding. *That explains why they were so amazed at Deadeye's decision with his kits,* she thought to herself. *They were in the same situation, but Heatherstar chose their health instead of trying to get more warriors.*

She caught the eye of Smallmoon, and immediately sent him a congratulatory glance. He certainly would be a good warrior—though he was always cold to her, Spottedpaw knew that he had the well-being of BlazeClan in mind. She truly couldn't hold the behavior against him.

Shuffling came from the entrance of the camp, catching the attention of most. Spottedpaw leaned forward to peek around Jayleaf, curious to find out who was causing the noise. Whitenose entered the camp dutifully with Talonstrike; behind them trailed none other than Brightpelt and Muddapple.

Immediately, surprised whispers rippled through the Clan. Cats who had retreated to the edges of the camp quickly began to crowd the newcomers, bombarding them with questions and demands. Spottedpaw instinctively shrunk behind Jayleaf while still peering around his larger frame, flinching when Muddapple scanned the clearing and met her gaze.

"Is there something I can do for you two?" Heatherstar's voice rang over the surprised murmurs. Spottedpaw snapped her head around and saw Heatherstar approaching the medicine cats, her blue gaze wary.

"We came to speak with you," Brightpelt responded confidently. "You, and your medicine cats, if that's okay."

Heatherstar fixed them with her gaze for a few minutes. It was clear from the expression on her face that she was debating whether to question them. In the end, she seemingly decided against it.

"Very well. Follow me." Heatherstar turned around and led them toward the ledge that led to her den. "Blueheart, Skyfeather!" Though she called to the medicine cats over her shoulder, they were already rushing to follow her, their eyes wide with bewilderment.

The entire Clan watched them as they climbed up the ledge. An ominous silence followed them until they disappeared into the leader's den. Once inside, Yellowheart perched himself just outside of the den, his expression guarded. As soon as they were inside the den, the clearing erupted into curious and confused murmuring.

"That's Brightpelt and Muddapple!

"Aren't they the SwiftClan medicine cats?"

"Did something happen to SwiftClan?"

"Maybe they need our help!"

"Why come to us for help? We've suffered worse than SwiftClan has!"

"The half moon was only a few sunrises ago! If they needed something, they could have mentioned it then!" Spottedpaw shuffled awkwardly at the mention of the half moon, recalling the vision she'd received from Shadestar. As if reading her mind, others began to whisper her name.

"Didn't Spottedpaw visit Starfalls during the half moon?"

"You're right! What if they recognized her and came to demand that we send her away?"

"Fishstar wouldn't send medicine cats for that! They're bound to a code of peace!"

"Things have changed since Deadeye rose to power, as far as you know Fishstar could have thrown out the codes altogether!"

"We can't afford to be at war with the other Clans over one cat! We should just send her away!"

Spottedpaw found herself shrinking away yet again, desperate for the whispers to cease. She grew painfully aware of the dubious and suspicious glances her new Clanmates threw her. Jayleaf turned to her, his eyes glittering with worry.

"Did something happen at Starfalls?" he queried, his tone level. "It is pretty odd timing, but I doubt you're in trouble, you know."

"They recognized me at Starfalls," Spottedpaw admitted, feeling her mood deflate. "They acted oddly, though. They didn't threaten us or anything—quite the opposite, actually. They convinced the other medicine cats that sheltering me is a good idea, but they had a really weird look in their eyes . . . ." Jayleaf snorted softly.

"Medicine cats always get that look in their eyes," he laughed, flicking his tail in amusement. "Especially now, they're always looking for some kind of prophecy or sign." Spottedpaw tried not to flinch at the mention of prophecies. *Surely they can't think I'm part of some prophecy,* she told herself, growing worried. *I don't* want *to be part of one! I just want to live a normal life.* She thought of what Shadestar told her several sunrises earlier, shuddering softly. *Maybe I'm supposed to battle this heir of Deadeye's.*

"Maybe you're right," Spottedpaw admitted reluctantly, still worrying about what the starry leader had said to her. "You don't think they think I'm part of one, do you?"

"Muddapple was eyeing you pretty closely," Jayleaf responded, his tone suddenly serious. "They could very well think something like that—who knows, maybe you *are* part of one. It wouldn't exactly be surprising." Spottedpaw blinked in surprise at his sudden shift in tone.

"I hope not. The last thing I need right now is the medicine cats and leaders trying to treat me differently." Jayleaf only chuckled in response, his gaze resting on Heatherstar's ledge. Spottedpaw followed his gaze, anticipation building up inside her. Somehow, she knew that the sudden arrival of the SwiftClan medicine cats had something to do with her. The timing of it all was far too convenient to be merely a coincidence.

After some time, Spottedpaw's legs grew weary where she sat. She sent Jayleaf a glance and saw that his eyes drooped with exhaustion. Though most of the crowd had dispersed, a few extraordinarily curious cats remained beneath the ledge—a few of whom continued to shoot Spottedpaw rather distrustful glances.

The apprentice shuffled a bit, trying to push their searching gazes to the back of her mind.

"You know," Jayleaf mewed, his voice heavy with sleep. "If you *are* part of some crazy, forest-saving prophecy, it'd be pretty cruel to just throw you into the deep of it. You're only an apprentice." He shrugged and rose to his paws. Spottedpaw saw his gaze drift to the group of cats that sat beneath the ledge overlooking the clearing. With a slightly louder tone, he turned back to her, mewing, "Ignore them, and try not to sit out here all night. They'll come out when they're ready."

Spottedpaw mustered up a reassuring nod, though she said nothing as Jayleaf padded off to the warriors' den. *I need to be here when they leave,* she told herself. *In case this is about me.* She looked to the sky, noticing how the sun had already begun to set. *Has it really been that long? What could they possibly be talking about?*

Just as she wondered about what drove the SwiftClan medicine cats to visit, a flash of movement came from the mouth of Heatherstar's den. The dark-furred she-cat emerged from the den and stopped at the very end of the ledge, letting her gaze sweep across the clearing below her. From where she sat, Spottedpaw could see the tufts of fur on her cheeks swaying slightly in the wind. Heatherstar's gaze stopped when she met Spottedpaw's, her blue eyes twinkling curiously.

Without a word, Heatherstar swept her tail in a beckoning motion to Spottedpaw. When the apprentice didn't move, she repeated the motion and jerked her head gently. *Why does she want to see me?* Spottedpaw thought with an inward groan. She rose to her paws and padded along the outskirts of the camp, careful not to let the setting sun cast her shadow across the clearing. Slowly, Spottedpaw climbed the ledge leading to Heatherstar. As she did so, she thought of the Gorge once again, and the precarious cliff that their cave resided over.

"Come," Heatherstar mewed softly when Spottedpaw reached her. The leader gave Spottedpaw no time to question her before retreating to her den once more. In turn, Spottedpaw started to follow her. She hesitated to cast a glance at Yellowheart, who'd

remained outside Heatherstar's den with his head held high. The deputy didn't meet Spottedpaw's gaze; he only stared beyond her, as if she wasn't even there.

Spottedpaw took a deep breath and looked back to the entrance of the den. After taking another moment to prepare herself, she felt her way through the entrance, pushing past a thin lichen curtain on the inside. In the center of the den sat Heatherstar. To the left sat Blueheart and Skyfeather, looking confused and troubled. On the right Brightpelt and Muddapple sat, their eyes shrouded with austerity.

When Spottedpaw appeared beyond the curtain, the eyes of every medicine cat snapped to her. Skyfeather rose to her paws, but Blueheart rested his tail across her back before she could move. Muddapple and Brightpelt remained rooted to their spots, the former's golden-colored eyes fixated on Spottedpaw as if trying to read her.

"Spottedpaw," Blueheart spoke, his voice raspy, "tell us why you had to escape the Gorge—make sure it's the truth this time." Spottedpaw felt her blood run cold and froze where she stood.

"I– I told you already," she stammered. "They found out that Hawkscar taught me about StarClan, and told him to kill me to prove his loyalty."

"Deadeye wouldn't settle for that," Heatherstar murmured, her blue eyes appearing greyish-purple in the darkness. "Deadeye would have killed Hawkscar, and assigned you a more loyal mentor. One that he knew would scare you into loyalty. You know this as well as I do."

"Y-You're not wrong," Spottedpaw responded before losing her words. She couldn't think of how to respond to it—it was clear they knew that there was something deeper happening.

"At Starfalls, when you woke up, you looked like you'd seen a ghost," Brightpelt spoke slowly, her turquoise eyes glittering thoughtfully. "We tried brushing it off, since most apprentices don't get to actually *see* StarClan on their visit to Starfalls, but we chose

to come here to speak with Heatherstar and the medicine cats to find out for sure."

"When you were recovering from your escape," Skyfeather chimed in, "Blueheart and I noticed you often twitched or thrashed about in your sleep. We thought you were just having nightmares of what happened that night, but . . . ." She trailed off, looking unsure about saying more.

"You uttered a few names in your sleep," Blueheart finished speaking for his apprentice. "The first few times I thought I was only hearing things, but when Skyfeather mentioned it, I knew it was true. Surely Hawkscar didn't teach you about Shadestar, or Crowstar."

Spottedpaw gulped and opened her mouth to speak, only for her words to escape her once again. *I was being so careful,* she thought desperately. When their searching gazes remained unwavering, she felt herself cave to them.

"F-Fine!" she burst out after a moment of suffocating silence. "Sometimes, I see Shadestar and Crowstar in my dreams. It's not like I want to or anything! They keep bothering me. When Hawkscar found out, he taught me about StarClan. I told one of my friends, but someone must have eavesdropped on me, and they told Deadeye, and h– he lost it when he found out. Frozenleaf knew, too, but I didn't tell her, she—"

"Calm down," Heatherstar mewed reassuringly. Spottedpaw stopped speaking and realized she'd started hyperventilating, and her claws were scraping painfully against the floor of the den. "What did they tell you in these dreams? Did they visit you at Starfalls?"

"No! Well, yes, Shadestar did—"

"What did he say?" Muddapple leaned forward, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"He said that Deadeye's choosing an *heir* soon, and told me to be careful. It wasn't too weird, but then he– he made the *stars* move.

They formed silhouettes of three cats, two of them were . . . guarding the third. They didn't have enough features for me to recognize them, though."

"And you said he's visited you like this before? Has he said anything else that seemed odd? Prophetic, perhaps?" Muddapple continued, narrowing his eyes. Brightpelt cleared her throat forcefully and nudged him. Spottedpaw bristled indignantly. She opened her mouth to speak again, only to be cut off by Heatherstar.

"Muddapple, Brightpelt, thank you for bringing this to our attention. If that's all you came for, I must politely request that you return to your Clan." The leader cast a guarded look to the visiting medicine cats, who returned their attention to her. Brightpelt looked hesitant, and Muddapple rolled his eyes and dipped his head to Heatherstar.

"Actually," he started, "we wanted to request that Spottedpaw comes to live in SwiftClan, instead."

Spottedpaw's jaw dropped at the suggestion, entirely taken aback. The rest of the BlazeClan cats stared at the brown tabby incredulously.

"You *what?"*

Chapter 19

"You *what?!"*

"Hear us out, Heatherstar," Brightpelt spoke quickly, a pleading tone slipping into her voice.

"What could your reasoning possibly be?" Heatherstar snapped, her eyes fiery. Spottedpaw glanced wordlessly between the gathered cats, the tension in the air so thick that she could nearly feel it.

"Put your feelings aside, Heatherstar," Muddapple spoke clearly, stepping forward. "Think about it. Whoever chased her, they saw her flee into your territory. They would have told Deadeye, and he knows that none of the leaders would turn down a chance to gain an upper hand on him. What if they come to finish the job?" Spottedpaw shuddered at the sentence, ignoring the feeling of dread that surfaced with it.

"Yes!" Brightpelt spoke up next to her apprentice. "We know BlazeClan has been repeatedly targeted, and if Spottedpaw stays, it might only lead to more violence for your Clan. Deadeye is ruthless and relentless, and he's already targeting you for territory expansions."

"I suppose you have a point . . . ." When Heatherstar hesitated, and then looked thoughtful, panic pushed the apprentice to speak out.

"You can't send me away!" Spottedpaw burst out, digging her claws into the floor of the den. "I've only just gotten used to being here! I was given my first chance to start proving myself today! I don't know anyone in SwiftClan, but here I had Jayleaf and Swallowclaw to stick by me." She dreaded the idea of starting over again, without knowing anybody or being trusted by them.

Spottedpaw threw a desperate glance toward Skyfeather and Blueheart, silently begging them to back her up. The two medicine

cats gave one another uneasy glances, but when Blueheart looked back to Spottedpaw, his gaze hardened. The bluish-grey tom let out a defeated sigh.

"Spottedpaw, their logic makes sense. The safest place for you is not BlazeClan—and, in turn, your presence puts us even more at risk." The old medicine cat refused to meet her gaze, and Spottedpaw felt her heart sink at his words.

"You can't just toss her between Clans like a rotten piece of prey," Skyfeather muttered, lashing her tail. "She's only an apprentice. She's already experienced so much, it would be wrong of us to demand this of her."

"It isn't our choice to make, Skyfeather," Blueheart snapped, turning on his apprentice. "You know it just as well as I. I'm certain that Brightpelt and Muddapple would not have come had they thought of a better solution." *Not their choice?* Spottedpaw thought incredulously. *Well, it certainly isn't* my *choice by the sound of things!* She struggled to remain silent again, though she desperately wanted to lash out.

"What—" Heatherstar began speaking with narrowed eyes, but Muddapple cut her off.

"Heatherstar, there are some things that we need to tell you," the brown tabby murmured, throwing an uneasy glance in Spottedpaw's direction. "Spottedpaw, would you mind giving us a moment of privacy?"

Spottedpaw opened her mouth to oppose the idea, but quickly thought better of it. Instead, she fixed the medicine cats with a glare before turning on them and retreating from Heatherstar's den. Once outside, she saw that Yellowheart was still perched dutifully outside of the den, his gaze sweeping the clearing below. Without uttering a word to the broad-shouldered deputy, Spottedpaw clambered down the ledge. She silently cursed to herself when she sent a shower of pebbles and dust into the clearing.

Once she'd made it down, she was relieved to see that she was alone in the clearing. *It would have been embarrassing to send all those*

pebbles over some unsuspecting cat, she thought. Movement on the other side of the clearing caught her eye; upon shifting her gaze, Spottedpaw saw that Firthistle and Bouncepool were sending glances in her direction. The golden-furred apprentice did her best to ignore their stares. Instead, she glanced around the clearing, searching for a spot to wait for Heatherstar and the medicine cats to finish their discussion. Not far off was a sand-filled groove directly underneath the ledge that led to Heatherstar's den.

When she saw it, Spottedpaw moved to the sandy groove in the ground. By now, the sun had disappeared over the horizon, leaving the cats of BlazeClan with a milky night sky. Faint traces of clouds littered the night sky, but they weren't thick enough to hide the first hints of Silverpelt. Spottedpaw looked up at the stars, letting out a crestfallen sigh. She knew that Hawkscar was up there somewhere —he *had* to be. If her ancestors were able to find Brownpaw, why not Hawkscar?

Oh, StarClan, Spottedpaw thought hopelessly. *Why can't you just say what you need from us? Or at least say why you've chosen to speak to me?* She scuffed at the sand beneath her, holding back another sigh. If Shadestar would just be more direct when he spoke to her, her life would be so much easier—though, she'd admit he was surprisingly candid when he visited her at the Starfalls.

"Hey, Spottedpaw!" Spottedpaw looked around and saw Bouncepool and Firthistle approaching her. This time, the former spoke to her, his pale-furred brother trailing behind him shyly. "That was a good catch earlier, that rabbit! Did Swallowclaw teach you to catch those?"

Spottedpaw blinked in surprise. "W-Well, Rockstorm taught me to be aware of stray stones on the ground, but my mentor in the Gorge taught me to hunt rabbits," she responded, taken aback by the sudden interest.

"Your mentor must have been really good!" Bouncepool responded, taking a seat once he was close enough. Firthistle did the same, though he said nothing.

"Yeah, he was great," Spottedpaw murmured softly. In the

indigo-colored sky, Silverpelt began to shine a little brighter. "What are you two up to? It's getting a bit late . . . ."

"I could ask you the same thing!" Bouncepool remarked, his eyes shining in amusement. "Though, *Firthistle* noticed that those medicine cats seemed quite interested in you. Perhaps that's why you're staying out here, no? Are you waiting around for that handsome SwiftClan medicine cat?" The brown-and-white tabby elbowed Firthistle roughly, to which the tabby tom muttered something.

"Oh, that? They're just batty medicine cats," Spottedpaw forced out a chuckle. "You know how they can get with their signs and such."

"Yeah, totally," Bouncepool murmured. He looked at the rising moon and rose to his feet suddenly. "Oh, wow, look at the time! I forgot I have this thing I told Talonstrike I'd take care of. See you guys later!" The poofy-furred tom gave Spottedpaw and Firthistle a lopsided smile before trotting off to the entrance of the camp, deliberately nudging into his brother on his way past.

Spottedpaw blinked in surprise and shifted where she sat, watching the young warrior's fluffy fur bounce as he rushed off. When she looked back to Firthistle, she saw that he was visibly irritated with his brother's antics. The pale brown tabby met her gaze and cleared his throat gracelessly.

"Are you alright? You were in Heatherstar's den for quite some time," he murmured awkwardly, glancing up at the ledge. "That's not always such a good thing. I c-can get you another mouse if you want."

Firthistle rose before Spottedpaw could respond. When he started moving toward the fresh-kill pile, Spottedpaw hastily stuck out her foreleg, stopping him from going. She offered him a sheepish gaze and, once she knew he wasn't rushing off to offer her more food, she sat back down.

"I'm fine, really," the words tumbled out of her mouth. "I've just . . . got a lot on my mind right now."

"That's understandable," Firthistle gave a chuckle and sat back down. "Especially with the dirty looks you've been getting. You've been making progress, though!"

"Yeah . . . ." Spottedpaw trailed off and looked at her paws. She didn't feel like she was making much progress, especially after the conversation she'd witnessed in Heatherstar's den.

"I noticed you talk more with Swallowclaw and Jayleaf around," Firthistle mumbled after an awkward silence. "You seem very close to them."

"They were friends with my mentor," Spottedpaw responded, thinking back to her first Gathering. "With how Heatherstar reacted when she saw me, I didn't want to deal with most of the other apprentices treating me weirdly, so I hung out near them instead. A-And I understood her reaction, really; I was apprenticed really early, but it was still overwhelming."

"It makes sense," the pale warrior mewed thoughtfully. "I bet getting thrown into a new Clan like this was a little disorienting, especially with Rockstorm criticizing every single twitch of your whiskers."

Spottedpaw let out a soft laugh and nodded. "Yeah," she mumbled. "It was pretty tough. But I've got Jayleaf, Skyfeather, and Swallowclaw on my side. And you, of course." The apprentice shot a shy glance at Firthistle, thankful for his kindness considering how distant she'd been.

"R-Right!" Firthistle mumbled after fumbling on his words a bit. "I also noticed that even Smallmoon softened up! He used to be pretty vocal about being against Heatherstar's decision to shelter you, though I suppose you could blame Rockstorm for that."

"Has he? It feels like he's still just as critical as his father," Spottedpaw gave another, softer chuckle this time and glanced toward the entrance of the camp. When she did, she saw a flash of brown and white fur moving about. *Has he really been watching us?* she thought, though she couldn't help but feel amused at Bouncepool's behavior. *Of course. That excuse to leave earlier was clearly fake.*

"Oh, he just acts like that. I've had to deal with it for as long as I can remember, you get used to it." Firthistle let out a laugh, but Spottedpaw only shifted in her spot. Judging by the way the medicine cats spoke in the leader's den, she knew she might not have a chance to get used to it.

As if on cue, Heatherstar exited her den and began to climb down the ledge. Behind her followed the four medicine cats, each of them sharing the same solemn expression. Spottedpaw resisted the urge to jump to her paws at the sight, especially when Muddapple cast his gaze down to her. Sympathy swam in the tom's golden gaze, telling Spottedpaw all that she needed to know.

"Did you know that Bouncepool has been peeking at us from the camp entrance?" Spottedpaw forced cheeriness into her tone as she ripped her gaze away from Muddapple.

"W-What?" Firthistle snapped to face the main entrance, narrowing his eyes. "That sneaky little— I'm sorry if he's made you feel weird or anything, I promise he doesn't mean anything by it."

"No, no, I think I understand," Spottedpaw gave a soft *mrrow* of laughter, keeping an eye on the group of medicine cats as they approached her alongside Heatherstar. "It's adorable, honestly, that he'd go so far out of his way for you. He's a good brother."

"I suppose you're right." Firthistle eased up again and gave a soft chuckle. "Do you have any family in the Gorge? I'm not sure how different it is there, but I'm sure having family must have helped."

"My father was one of Deadeye's most loyal warriors, and my mother was . . . well, distant," Spottedpaw murmured softly, surprising herself with how eager she was to talk about her family. "My siblings were nice, though. Dustpaw was always picking fights with me and coming for me, and Riverpaw always came by to settle our arguments for us. Dustpaw could be pretty cruel, but I think he's just got poor priorities; he admires Deadeye a lot. And Fernpaw . . . well, she's Fernpaw. She started pining after the medicine cat apprentice."

"They sure sound interesting," Firthistle mewed, his eyes

glittering with amusement. "You know—"

Heatherstar cleared her throat deliberately, interrupting Firthistle and sending him a meaningful glance. Behind her, the medicine cats murmured uneasily among one another, their voices too low for Spottedpaw to pick out any words. Firthistle returned Heatherstar's glance and, to everyone's surprise, stayed seated in his spot. When Heatherstar realized he wasn't going anywhere, she took another step toward Spottedpaw.

"Spottedpaw, we've come to the conclusion," Heatherstar started speaking rather awkwardly, "that it would be in *everyone's* best interest if you went to SwiftClan. If you'd like an explanation, you can speak with the medicine cats, though I can't promise they'll say anything that you understand." She sent a cool glance toward an uneasy-looking Blueheart. For the first time, Spottedpaw saw that Heatherstar's eyes glittered anxiously.

"Th-That can't be right," Spottedpaw tried to respond, registering what Heatherstar had said. The leader only shook her head.

"They raised valid reasons against your shelter here," she spoke clearly, though her voice hinted at something deeper than Spottedpaw could understand. "Should Deadeye come searching for you, you'd be killed—as would most of us, as punishment for sheltering you. You're an asset to the Clans, though, considering all of the circumstances."

"An *asset?"* Spottedpaw blurted out incredulously. She refused to believe that they only saw her as that; as some cheap war tactic to be tossed around until the right tactician used her to her fullest potential.

"Spottedpaw, please," Heatherstar fixed her with a steely gaze. "It would be safest for the entire forest if you stayed in SwiftClan. You know better than anybody here that Deadeye will do *anything* to get what he wants, especially if revenge is his goal. You'll get the rest of the night to say your goodbyes, and in the morning you'll be leaving." Spottedpaw looked to the steadily rising moon and held back a distressed sigh. Next to her, Firthistle jumped to his paws.

"How could you make her leave?" he demanded, his green eyes fiery. "She finally started getting comfortable. The others have barely stopped bad-mouthing her, and you want to force her to start over *again*?" The young warrior fixed Heatherstar with an accusatory glare. The leader only flinched at his rising tone, glancing around the camp nervously.

"Keep your voice down, Firthistle," she ordered. Turning to Spottedpaw, she added, "Muddapple will spend the night here with our medicine cats. In the morning, he'll be the one escorting you to SwiftClan. By then, Fishstar will have had a chance to explain the situation to his Clan, and your presence might be more readily accepted."

Before Spottedpaw or Firthistle could respond, Heatherstar spun around and climbed back up the ledge that led to her den. Spottedpaw let her gaze fall to the four medicine cats that remained, each of them looking more uncomfortable than the next.

"I'll get going," Brightpelt spoke up hesitantly, shooting Spottedpaw a sympathetic glance. "I'll tell Fishstar our decision, Muddapple. Make sure you take the path along the border of RushClan and NightClan; we can't let Deadeye see us."

"Yes, *mother,"* Muddapple responded with a facetious tone and a roll of his eyes. "Everything will be fine. Hurry back and deliver the news to the Clan." The two SwiftClan cats touched their muzzles together in a brief farewell. Brightpelt nodded to the other medicine cats before turning and leaving the camp.

Spottedpaw watched the white she-cat leave, growing surprisingly numb to her new reality. She expected her rage and disbelief to continue growing, especially considering how astonished she'd been earlier, but her emotions dissipated alongside the presence of the medicine cat. Beside her, Firthistle fidgeted, clearly upset.

"How could they do that to you?" he whispered rather loudly. "That's just . . . well, it's honestly not right." Blueheart narrowed his eyes at the young warrior, taking a few paces forward.

"If we could offer every ordinary kit and warrior the details, you wouldn't be complaining," he snapped, lashing his tail. The cats around him blinked in surprise. Even Skyfeather, who normally took his outbursts in stride, reeled back. "Trust in your medicine cats, and those of the other Clans. We're only doing what's best." Before anyone could say anything, he stomped off to the medicine den, grumbling under his breath.

"Ignore him," the younger BlazeClan medicine cat murmured hastily. "He's just a little on edge because of our current situation with the Gorge and Deadeye. I– I have to go prepare the traveling herbs for you, Spottedpaw. Muddapple, come with me, I'll show you your nest for the night."

Spottedpaw only blinked as the medicine cats retreated one by one. She knew something fishy was going on—it didn't take a genius to notice their odd behavior. Even though she'd noticed it, she wasn't entirely certain whether she wanted to know the cause of it. *If they really did receive a prophecy, and I'm somehow connected,* she thought, *I don't think I even want to know.* She'd lost enough sleep over Shadestar's visits and dreams.

More movement from beside her brought her attention to Firthistle once again. The tom had fixed her with a sad gaze; his green eyes glittered with longing.

"Don't look at me like that," Spottedpaw murmured with a forced chuckle. "I'll still be able to see you at Gatherings, if you can get over your shyness." She nudged him playfully, and the tom stumbled and looked away bashfully.

"I just wish we had more time to get closer," he mumbled. "You better take care of your farewells, the moon is already pretty high in the sky." Spottedpaw waved her tail in a silent *goodbye,* watching as he padded off to meet Bouncepool. The brown-and-white tom had, unbeknownst to the cats in the clearing, snuck back in to observe the ordeal. The poofy tom sent a glance to Spottedpaw before walking with his brother to the warriors' den.

"I need to find Swallowclaw and Jayleaf," Spottedpaw muttered to herself. She let out a sigh and glanced around the camp carefully

before making her way to the den that Firthistle had just vanished into. Upon poking her head inside, she saw that most of the nests were full; the exceptions, of course, being the two cats she was looking for, along with Rockstorm, Smallmoon, and Pouncefur. *Smallmoon is holding a vigil outside the camp entrance,* Spottedpaw reminded herself. *The rest must be on a night patrol. I'll just go peek outside the camp entrance, if I don't see them, it'll have to wait until morning.* She held back a wince at the thought of risking not telling her friends what was going on with her.

Hesitantly, Spottedpaw padded to the entrance of the camp. She took a deep breath before nosing her way through the entrance. When she poked her head outside the entrance, she noticed Smallmoon sitting a little ways off, his chin stuck up and chest puffed out in pride. She scanned what territory she could see in the darkness and, when she didn't see a trace of her friends, retreated to the inner camp with a dejected sigh.

Spottedpaw reluctantly decided to find Jayleaf and Swallowclaw in the morning to tell them what was happening. However, as she padded toward the apprentices' den, the entrance behind her rustled wildly. Spottedpaw spun around, breathing a sigh of relief when familiar faces appeared before her.

"Hey, Spottedpaw!" Jayleaf chirped as he and Swallowclaw emerged and padded up to her. "Isn't it a bit late? You should get some rest in case you go training tomorrow." Rockstorm and Pouncefur stopped not far away, murmuring softly to one another.

"I suppose I could go easy on you if you don't get enough sleep," Swallowclaw jested, his deep laughter rumbling in his chest. Spottedpaw glanced between them and scuffed at the sandy floor beneath her.

"I don't think you need to worry about that," she murmured awkwardly. "I, er, I'm leaving tomorrow." The warriors in front of her blinked in confusion, and Spottedpaw saw Rockstorm's ears perk slightly.

"What do you mean?" Jayleaf asked, though by his tone, Spottedpaw guessed that he already knew.

"Heatherstar told me that it would be in the best interest of everyone if I went to SwiftClan," she tried to speak clearly, though she didn't want many prying ears to overhear. "Muddapple will escort me there first thing in the morning, s-so . . . ."

"What?" Jayleaf blinked in disbelief, while Swallowclaw looked confused. "Did they say *why* this is the best option?"

"W-Well, I'm sure Frostheart saw me flee into this territory," Spottedpaw admitted. "I barely escaped him. They might come searching for me, and it'll be really bad for everyone here if they found me here." She didn't mention the medicine cats' odd behavior, or the fact that she suspected there were underlying reasons they kept secret.

"So?" Jayleaf snapped. "We'll fight tooth and claw to keep you safe. That's what Heatherstar promised when she decided to shelter you—she knew the risks."

"I say good riddance," Rockstorm chimed in from where he sat with his mate. "We've gone so far out of our way, for what? The less risk our Clan is at, the better." Jayleaf snapped his gaze to the smoky-furred tom, and Swallowclaw cleared his throat deliberately.

"Shut up, you bone-headed foxheart!" Pouncefur spat, swiping the tom over the ear. "Let her say her farewells in peace." Rockstorm grumbled unhappily and stalked off to the warriors' den, the ginger-and-white she-cat following closely behind him.

"A-Anyways," Spottedpaw stammered, watching the unhappy couple vanish. "This isn't the end of our friendship. We can still talk at Gatherings, you know—just like we used to with Hawkscar."

"If you're allowed to go to Gatherings," Swallowclaw added, his expression dark. "Fishstar is a smart leader; I'm certain Deadeye will have an eye out for you, and if I know it, then so does Fishstar. If you're allowed to attend Gatherings, he might make you stick to the outskirts of the clearing so that nobody in the Gorge sees you."

Spottedpaw nodded in understanding, though she briefly thought of Nightpaw and Riverpaw. More than anything, she

wanted to see her friend and brother once more.

"Do you two mind if we spend the night together?" she asked after a moment. "I left too many good cats in the Gorge without saying goodbye. I wanna make sure I do it right this time, even if we know we'll see each other again." Jayleaf nodded without a moment of hesitation, while Swallowclaw fixed her with a solemn gaze.

"I'll be awake to say farewell once again in the morning," the dark brown tabby murmured. "Don't worry." With that, the long-furred warrior padded to the warriors' den, leaving Spottedpaw and Jayleaf in each other's company.

Chapter 20

Spottedpaw yawned and exited the apprentices' den, squinting as the rising sun blinded her temporarily. The clearing was already buzzing with activity from warriors and apprentices alike, and Yellowheart's authoritative voice echoed as he sorted out the patrols of the day. In front of the deputy, Spottedpaw noticed Firthistle, Smallmoon, and Tinyflight, Smallmoon's old mentor, expectantly waiting to hear their duties of the day.

She felt a painful tug at her heart as she remembered what Heatherstar had told her the night before. For once, Spottedpaw found herself wishing that Rockstorm would critique her hunting and battle stances. Though irritating at first, she'd admit the smoky warrior's chastising nature grew on her. She could almost hear his condescending tone as he begrudgingly gave her advice whenever Swallowclaw chimed in.

With a sigh, Spottedpaw made her way to the medicine den. *They must have the traveling herbs ready,* she thought bitterly. When she squeezed into the den, the faint trickling of the pool in the furthest back corner soothed her worried mind. Off to her right, Spottedpaw noticed Muddapple sitting patiently. She was painfully aware of his golden gaze following her as she stepped further into the den.

"Blueheart?" she called hesitantly, wondering if the old medicine cat was in the crevice sorting through herbs. "Skyfeather? Are you around?"

"They went out to stock up on herbs," Muddapple spoke up when nobody else answered, startling the apprentice. "They left your traveling herbs with me." The brown tabby pushed forward a bundle of herbs, and Spottedpaw gave him a wary glance.

Without a word, she stepped forward until the bundle was at her paws. Spottedpaw turned her gaze down to the herbs and sniffed it hesitantly, enticing a chuckle from Muddapple.

"Just eat them," he murmured, amusement dripping from his voice. "I know that look. No, I didn't put anything in the herbs. I'm a medicine cat, for StarClan's sake. Not everyone is out to get you, Spottedpaw." Spottedpaw looked back up to meet his gaze and saw that, to her surprise, he didn't look offended at all. After a moment of thought, Spottedpaw felt silly for her silent suspicions and ate the bundle of traveling herbs.

"Thanks," she mumbled awkwardly. The apprentice nodded to him and rushed out of the den, not wanting to suffer another moment under his inquisitive gaze. When she entered the main clearing once more, she was met with familiar faces.

"Spottedpaw!" Firthistle called and bounded toward her, Bouncepool close behind him. "I have to go on some morning patrols, but I just wanted to say goodbye one more time. I-It would have been nice to have more time with you, but Heatherstar won't waver no matter how much I beg her to reconsider."

"Oh," Spottedpaw spoke, taken aback by his kindness. "You didn't have to do that for me, Firthistle. I'm sure she gave you a scolding for it."

"Not at all!" the pale brown tom assured her, his green eyes glimmering and a hint of a blush resting on his muzzle. "I wanted to try and persuade her. We can still talk at Gatherings, though! I promise, if I see you, I'll come say hi!" Together, the two brothers bounced off to meet the rest of their patrol. Not far off, Spottedpaw noticed Talonstrike watching their interactions. His sharp-angled face held a stoic expression, and his long-furred tail tip fluttered lazily at his paws. Before she could look any closer, Swallowclaw and Jayleaf approached her.

"You know where to find me at the Gatherings," Jayleaf murmured before Swallowclaw could speak. The grey tabby's eyes were round with sadness as he spoke. "You better come say *'hi'* if you see us!"

"I will," Spottedpaw promised, nudging him affectionately with her paw. "How could I go to a Gathering and *not* sit with my BlazeClan buddies?" Jayleaf gave a chuckle and stepped back,

indicating that it was Swallowclaw's turn to say his farewells.

"You've come a long way," the long-furred warrior started, his gaze solemn. "The future must have some big plans for you, with medicine cats chasing after you like this. Hawkscar would be proud. When it's my turn to travel to StarClan, I'll make sure he knows that he did a good job." Spottedpaw frowned at his words, tilting her head.

"Don't talk like that," she teased, though she was serious. "You're not going anywhere yet!"

"That's right," Jayleaf chimed in, a hint of worry flashing across his gaze briefly. "You're stuck with me for plenty more seasons, whether you like it or not!" The three cats laughed with one another for a few moments, each of them trying to fight off the gloom that threatened their minds and hearts.

Spottedpaw glanced up, noticing that Heatherstar watched her from atop her ledge. The black-furred leader sat with a noble posture, her expression unreadable and her bluish-lavender eyes piercing Spottedpaw from afar. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes ripped her own gaze away from the BlazeClan leader, trying not to get mad. *If the medicine cats say this is for the best, then they must have their reasons,* she told herself firmly. As she was trying to convince herself that this was a good thing, Muddapple approached her, his tail swaying lazily behind him.

"Are you ready to depart?" the medicine cat asked, his golden eyes as inquisitive as ever. "We'll want to leave soon, so we can make the most out of our sunlight. The days are already getting shorter as we near leafbare."

Spottedpaw let her gaze travel over the BlazeClan cats one more time, wishing she'd had more time to say her farewells. She knew that there was a chance she'd never see some of these cats again, though she told herself that she could try to spot them at Gatherings.

"Y-Yeah," she stammered after a moment. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Let's go, then," Muddapple responded, swiveling around and leading her out of the BlazeClan camp. As soon as they left the camp, Spottedpaw felt as though the still-blinding sun would wear her down despite offering little warmth. Muddapple led her along silently, his tail still swaying lazily as he walked.

For countless unbearable moments, they walked under this suffocating silence. At least, that's how it felt to Spottedpaw. If the SwiftClan medicine cat apprentice felt similar, he showed no signs of it. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes and made a face at him, wondering what he could be thinking. Then, she got an idea.

"So," the dappled tabby apprentice started, quickening her pace to catch up with him. "What exactly *was* your reasoning behind this? I mean, I get it, Deadeye and all, but do you really expect me to believe that's the only reason?"

"We've already told you," the brown tabby mewed curtly. "Deadeye is unstable, and you know it more than any cat."

"Sure," Spottedpaw responded, letting her tone soften. "But I also know that Deadeye is a lot of things; one of the things he's not is an idiot. BlazeClan sheltering me would be the most obvious result, so that could easily be the last place he checks!"

"Perhaps that's true," Muddapple murmured, letting his own voice grow terse. Spottedpaw fell back a few steps and rolled her eyes, quickly growing frustrated.

"Yeah, it is," she muttered to herself. Then, she spoke up again. "It is true, and if I know it, then surely you do. That means that this *isn't* the best option considering your reasoning, which *means* that you have another reason!"

"Perhaps I do," the golden-eyed tom sent a cool glance over his shoulder. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise, having gotten used to his blatant interest in her. "If that's the case, you'll find out when the time is appropriate. For now, we've got a destination to reach, and all that talking will only wear you out."

Spottedpaw opened her mouth to object, but quickly thought

better of it. *What ruffled his fur the wrong way?* she wondered sourly, lowering her head as they continued traveling. Before she knew it, they had reached the Gathering clearing. Spottedpaw sniffed the air tentatively and quickly recognized the RushClan and NightClan that weren't far off. As they padded along the northern outskirts of the clearing that sheltered the Gathering Stones, she noticed another vaguely familiar scent, and realized that it must be SwiftClan.

As they crossed the border, she noticed that the barren land that made up BlazeClan territory slowly grew more forested. Up ahead, several large hills stretched out, making up the marshy moorland of SwiftClan. Spottedpaw cringed as she stepped in a particularly swampy spot, the cold, wet mud squishing between her toes.

"You'll get used to it," Muddapple called over his shoulder, seemingly unbothered by the mud as he kept striding ahead. Spottedpaw grimaced and shook out her paw before bounding forward to catch up to him. The further into the territory they delved, the more Spottedpaw noticed. It wasn't all muddy, marshy land; on the hills that made up the moors and the dips in between, the land was relatively dry, and although there weren't many trees around, the shrubbery provided plenty of shelter.

Spottedpaw blinked when she realized that he was leading her to an area heavily overrun by gorse and sedge. The widespread thicket seemed to lie in the heart of the territory and, as they drew closer, she realized it must be the camp. Muddapple padded through a tunnel of gorse and, hesitantly, Spottedpaw followed him.

Inside the camp, cats bustled about excitedly. A burly, golden-brown tom stood in front of two smaller grey cats, his expression stern but his tail twitching in amusement. Just outside of a den—Spottedpaw assumed it was the nursery—a bluish-grey tom with a white-spotted muzzle sat next to a plump grey tabby she-cat, while three kits of various shades of grey tumbled about in front of them. On the other side of the camp, a brown tabby with lighter tan markings on his legs sat with a fluffy black molly with striking eyes that were an odd mixture of green and brown. A tortoiseshell she-cat sat close to a dappled pale-grey molly, and after a moment Spottedpaw recognized them as Dapplecloud and Fernwillow. *They all look so close,* she thought. *Like the families I saw in BlazeClan.*

She blinked when Muddapple cleared his throat, and she noticed he was waiting for her to follow him further. Spottedpaw hesitated a moment before following him; peeking ahead of him, she saw that he was leading her to a broken tree stump. In front of the stump, she saw Brightpelt sitting next to an older brown tabby tom. *That's Fishstar!* she realized. *Are they waiting for me?*

"I'm glad to see you back in one piece," Brightpelt purred to her apprentice, greeting him with a touch of their noses. Fishstar said nothing, his green eyes fixated on Spottedpaw.

"I'm lucky this apprentice didn't talk me to death," Muddapple responded, sending a teasing glance to Spottedpaw. "She claims that we have *ulterior motives* in bringing her here." The two medicine cats gave purrs of amusement, and Spottedpaw shuffled her paws sheepishly. She noticed that several of the cats in the clearing were peeking at her curiously, though none of them said anything, nor did they approach her.

"Welcome," Fishstar spoke after the medicine cats quieted down. His tone was warm and welcoming, relieving Spottedpaw only slightly. "As you might have noticed, several of the cats here recognize you from Gatherings or patrols with the Gorge. Before you get worried, I'll tell you that those who recognized your description spoke up and claimed that you never behaved the same way as your kin and campmates. Even so, I've already spoken with everyone, and nobody should be giving you a hard time."

"Th-That's relieving," Spottedpaw admitted shyly. "In BlazeClan, a lot of cats were pretty vocal about wanting to deny me shelter."

"If anyone gives you a hard time, feel free to come to me or Grassheart about it," Fishstar reassured her, flicking his tale to the light tabby she saw earlier. "I know that, even though you were apprenticed rather early, you've been an apprentice for some time now. You shouldn't have long left before you earn your warrior name; I'll take you on as my own apprentice, and I won't make you do everything all over again. You've trained in the Gorge *and* in another Clan—you know how everything goes. Once I've decided that you can hunt and fight well enough, you'll receive your name."

"What about Gatherings?" Spottedpaw blurted out before she could think twice. More than anything, she wanted to attend Gatherings to see her friends again.

"What about them?" Fishstar responded smoothly, his face suddenly stoic. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes slightly and examined his expression.

"Can I go?"

"No." Fishstar held her gaze for a moment, and Spottedpaw heard Muddapple snicker softly under his breath. Fighting back the urge to send the medicine cat a glare, Spottedpaw sat down calmly.

"Okay . . . why not?"

"Spottedpaw, according to Blueheart, you only escaped the Gorge a moon ago—if that! Deadeye is surely still keeping an eye out for you; his patrols have certainly let us know. Your presence at a Gathering will only bring more risks."

"Please!" Spottedpaw begged quietly, tearing at the grass beneath her with her claws. "I'll hide at the back of the clearing, in the bushes where nobody can see me! I just wanna make sure my friends are okay. I left some cats at the Gorge and I'm really, really worried about them." Spottedpaw desperately wanted to see Nightpaw and Riverpaw, to know what they were safe. Fishstar fixed her with a stern look and gave a defeated sigh.

"Fine," he murmured begrudgingly. "You can come *if* you promise to focus on finishing your training. You don't want to be an apprentice longer than you have to. Now," the leader added when Spottedpaw nodded eagerly, "Go and introduce yourself to the other apprentices. They're over there, by the burly golden warrior. Your training will start tomorrow, so be prepared." Fishstar dismissed her with a wave of his tail and led the medicine cats into a nearby den. *That went a lot better than I expected,* Spottedpaw thought in surprise. She let her gaze wander to the warrior Fishstar mentioned and noticed the two small, grey cats from before.

Spottedpaw padded over to them hesitantly, realizing that the

warrior nearby must have been scolding them. When she drew nearer, both of the apprentices looked at her with wide eyes. The burly warrior that had been lecturing them also paused, letting his austere gaze rest on Spottedpaw.

"Hi there!" the grey tabby she-cat chirped, a thick accent lacing her voice. "Aren't you that one cat from the Gorge? Spotty-somethin'?" Spottedpaw stopped in her tracks, surprised at their forwardness. She examined the molly carefully; the strange apprentice didn't *seem* hostile, but it could be a trick.

"Shut up, Mosspaw!" the other, a solid grey tom, hissed sharply. Though his voice carried a hint of an accent, Spottedpaw wouldn't have noticed it if it weren't for the other molly. The solid grey cat turned back to her and stepped forward. "I'm Mousepaw, and this is my sister, Mosspaw. You must be Spotpaw, right? Fishstar said you'd be coming!"

"It's actually Spottedpaw," the golden tabby corrected slowly. "A-And it's nice to meet you both. Fishstar said to introduce myself, so, er, here I am." Spottedpaw let out an awkward chuckle and glanced at her paws, suddenly unsure of herself. *I sound so stupid!* she thought hopelessly. *Ugh, I hope they don't laugh at me.* To her surprise, Mousepaw bounced forward a few pawsteps. When he did so, she realized his eyes were differently colored—one was a deep blue, while the other was a striking yellow.

"That's great! Come with me, I can show you around!" Before Spottedpaw could respond, Mousepaw whisked away, leaving her to trail hopelessly after him. "My sister and I are the only apprentices right now," he mentioned once Spottedpaw had caught up to him. "Juniperstorm's kits were born not too long ago, so they have a while before they become apprentices. They're already causing a ruckus though, those three—especially that Bristlekit!"

Spottedpaw didn't respond as he led her up to a pair of cats. One was a lithe, whitish molly with a darker muzzle, tail tip, and paws. Next to her was a grey tabby tom with striking yellow eyes and cream-colored eartips. Somehow, Spottedpaw felt like she recognized the molly from somewhere, but ultimately decided that she'd seen her at a Gathering.

"Spottedpaw, these are my parents, Hollyheart and Ploverfern!" Mousepaw mewed cheerily once he sat in front of them. "Mom, dad, this is Spottedpaw! She's the apprentice Fishstar told us about!" The two warriors exchanged an amused glance before turning back to Spottedpaw.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Ploverfern, the tom, meowed. His voice trembled slightly, and Spottedpaw blinked when she realized he was struggling to hold back a chuckle.

"Oh, Spottedpaw!" Hollyheart exclaimed, her deep blue eyes glittering with surprise. Spottedpaw noticed that she shared the same accent that Mosspaw and Mousepaw carried. "I recognize you from a border issue some moons ago—that angsty brown kit that chased a mouse onto our territory!" Spottedpaw felt her ears heat up in embarrassment when she remembered the incident.

"That'd be my brother, Dustpaw," she admitted sheepishly. "He wasn't always like that, he just got a pretty mean mentor."

Hollyheart let out a song-like laughter, nodding empathetically. "Siblings suck, honey. I'm sure he'll get over it eventually." Spottedpaw nodded and glanced at Mousepaw, noticing he was waiting for her attention.

"Come on! I'll show you our den!" Once again, he sped off without waiting for Spottedpaw. The golden apprentice rushed after him, holding back an amused roll of her eyes. "My uncle's the deputy, you know," he boasted, sticking his chest out proudly. "And my parents are great warriors!"

"Your uncle?" Spottedpaw echoed, the meaning of the word lost to her.

"Yeah, you know, aunts and uncles, your parents' siblings! Grassheart is my dad's brother, and so is Longstep! They're so cool!" As Mousepaw kept chattering, Spottedpaw drifted off into thought. She wondered if any other cat in the Gorge was related to her aside from her parents and siblings. It'd be hard to say, considering how distant they kept their kin. *Being with these Clans is so different,* she thought. *Even so, it's . . . kinda nice.* The more she thought, the more

she wondered—until she remembered Rocksplash mentioning that Fireclaw and Foxleap were siblings. *I'd have never guessed,* she wondered to herself. *I don't even think I've seen them interact before.*

"Hee-lloooo! Earth to Spottedpaw!" Spottedpaw blinked and realized that Mousepaw was waving his paw in front of her face.

"Stop that!" Spottedpaw muttered, pushing his paw away. She briefly wondered what was compelling him to act like this; she'd never seen anything like it. Then again, most cats she knew were emotionally constipated or wary of her.

"You totally zoned out!" Mousepaw huffed in a pouting manner, though he quickly got over it. "I *said* I'll be getting my warrior name soon! Mosspaw, too! It'll be any day now, I just know it!"

"That's great to hear," Spottedpaw mewed back, careful to keep her voice level. "I bet you're *really* excited."

"Yeah! It'd be super cool if we got our warrior names together, Spottedpaw! Fishstar said that you escaped Deadeye, so you must be *really* skilled. I've never heard of anyone escaping that place!"

"N-No, I don't think so," Spottedpaw murmured, growing sheepish again. "I just got lucky, really."

"You'd need more than luck to escape him!" Mousepaw paused for a moment, and when Spottedpaw didn't respond, he continued. "I wonder what my warrior name will be. I don't want something lame like Mousepelt, or something horrible like Mouseheart—I wanna be Mousecatcher! Oh, or Mouse*slayer.* That'd be so *cool!* What about you, Spottedpaw?"

"Uh . . . ." The question took Spottedpaw by surprise, so she sat dumbfounded for a few moments. "I'll be honest, I've never really thought that far ahead. I just figured I get it when I get it, and it'll just . . . be."

"Aw, c'mon! What kind of apprentice doesn't dream about their warrior name?" Mousepaw pouted, then his eyes lit up. "Oh! I'll list some off, tell me what you think, alright?"

"I guess that's okay," Spottedpaw murmured reluctantly, sitting down to listen to the potential names. Mousepaw sat as well, his face scrunched up as if he were pretending to think.

"Alright! How about . . . Spottedwillow! Spottedberry? Oh, Spottedfrost! That sounds cool, doesn't it?"

"I think those sound funny," Spottedpaw retorted, scrunching up her face. "Besides, it isn't like you can change them once you get it."

"Sure you can!" Mousepaw objected, jumping to his paws. "All you have to do is ask Fishstar to grant it! My mentor, Hazelberry did it. Come on, I'll keep showing you around." Spottedpaw blinked in surprise. Suddenly, she thought of Hawkscar and Deadeye; the two toms certainly weren't born with those names, and must have changed them when they received the wounds they were named after. As she followed Mousepaw, Spottedpaw wondered if she would like the name Fishstar assigned her, or if she'd want to change her name entirely to forget her past in the Gorge.

Chapter 21

Spottedpaw sat wordlessly on the moorland, several small voles gathered at her paws as she waited for the hunting patrol to regroup. A chilly breeze swayed the surrounding grass, tickling the tufts of fur in her ears. *I can't believe this was all I could find,* she cursed herself silently. Glancing to her right, she noticed that Longstep, a long-legged pale tabby, had caught two rabbits and a wren. Spottedpaw tried not to let her disappointment show, though it was clear that the warrior next to her noticed it.

The warrior shifted awkwardly where he sat, glancing around the moorland. "So," he started, "what was your life like in the Gorge?"

"It was . . . different from what I've experienced in BlazeClan, and here in SwiftClan," Spottedpaw responded after a moment of hesitation. "Families here are . . . well, families. In the Gorge, we call our parents by their names, and parents don't interact with their children very much." Longstep cast his gaze to her and hesitated before speaking again.

"Does that apply to the queens, too?"

"Well, my mother was nice enough at first," the apprentice responded thoughtfully. "Ever since my apprenticeship, though, she stopped talking to all of us. She never really gave us a second glance after that. One of the other queens cared much more deeply for her kits, but she often got in trouble for it. I think it might have been because nobody knew the father of her kits—her closeness to them, I mean. And the other queen—"

"They didn't know the father? W-What did this queen look like?" Longstep queried a bit too eagerly. Spottedpaw shot him a look, unable to stop the laughter that erupted from her chest.

"What, are you chasing after mateless queens, Longstep?" she teased between snickers. "Come on, you have potential, I'm sure."

"N-No! It's not like that at all!" the pale warrior retorted quickly, visibly flustered by the comment. He looked away quickly, his ears flattened to his head in embarrassment. "I was just curious!" Spottedpaw struggled to cease her giggles, too busy laughing to wonder why the tall warrior would be interested in a queen from the Gorge.

Just then, Mirepelt, Hazelberry, and Mousepaw appeared from a thicket of gorse. Each of them carried a few pieces of prey in their jaws, looking satisfied with their catches. Without uttering a word, Mirepelt began to lead them back to camp, the light brown markings on his legs muddied from his hunting. *He must have gone hunting in the marshes!* Spottedpaw realized, looking closer to what he'd caught. When she did, she realized a frog hung in between a mouse and a vole. She scrunched her nose in distaste and followed after him, along with the rest of the patrol. Spottedpaw felt like she stuck out like a broken tree branch, though the feeling wasn't as noticeable as when she was in the BlazeClan—or the Gorge, for that matter.

"Look!" Mousepaw mewed suddenly. Spottedpaw and the warriors stopped and looked where he was pointing with his nose. Off in the distance, Fernwillow was haring over the hills; the grey warrior was headed straight toward the hunting patrol.

"She must be running laps," Hazelberry snorted in amusement. "That one always had an excessive amount of energy." The group let out a collective chuckle and began padding in the direction of their camp again. Spottedpaw paused when she thought she heard Fernwillow yowling. She stopped and perked her ears toward the young warrior, having a hard time hearing her over the increasing wind.

"Spottedpaw, come on," Mirepelt ordered without even glancing over his shoulder. "We don't want the prey going stale before we even return, do we?"

"I think Fernwillow is trying to say something to us," Spottedpaw murmured, watching as the she-cat grew closer.

"What?" Mirepelt stopped and turned around. The rest of the

patrol followed his lead, confused expressions resting on their faces.

"Help!" Spottedpaw heard it clearly this time. The panic in Fernwillow's voice caused worry to spread through the patrol, and they all dropped their prey as she reached them. "The– The Gorge," she panted out, her legs trembling beneath her. "The Gorge attacked the sunhigh patrol. Grassheart is with us, and he's badly injured. We need help."

Fury immediately rose within Spottedpaw. *Those fox-hearts,* she thought furiously. *I bet it was Deadeye's order. Surely they know they're in the wrong for that.* She narrowed her eyes and stormed forward, only to be stopped by Mirepelt.

"I know you want to fight back, but it's too dangerous for you to be seen by them," the brown tabby instructed plainly. "Go back for help—Mousepaw, go with her. I don't want any apprentices battling with cats from the Gorge. Go, now." Spottedpaw glared at him, tempted to ignore his orders and fight anyways. Thinking again, she decided to obey his orders. Together, she and Mousepaw raced toward the camp, abandoning the prey they'd collected.

Once they reached the camp, Spottedpaw froze, desperately searching for Fishstar. *Brackenclaw, Ploverfern, Birchtail, Cottontuft, Juniperstorm—where is Fishstar?* she thought desperately, subconsciously tearing at the grass beneath her paws. Behind her, Mousepaw burst into the camp and came skidding to a halt.

"We need help!" he yowled, his voice ringing around the camp. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise, but realized that it was a better plan than she had. Quickly, a worried crowd formed around them; Fishstar shouldered his way to the front.

"We were hunting, and Fernwillow came to us—she said that the Gorge attacked the sunhigh patrol and that Grassheart was gravely injured," Spottedpaw explained, struggling to keep her tone level.

"What?" Fishstar mewed in disbelief, cursing under his breath. "At a time like this? Ploverfern, Cottontuft, Brackenclaw, and Birchtail, find and aid the patrol; get the wounded out of there as fast as you can."

"Yes, sir!" the warriors chimed simultaneously, streaming out of the camp.

"As for you two," Fishstar turned to the two apprentices, unease written across his face. "Make sure Mosspaw is in the camp, and *stay here.* We can't be certain that this is an isolated incident. Help with anything that your elder Clanmates need." Fishstar bounded out of the camp; Spottedpaw assumed he was going to help the wounded escape the attack. She exchanged a glance with Mousepaw and began to pad to the apprentices' den to check for Mosspaw.

"If Birchtail was at the camp, surely she'd be here, right?" Spottedpaw murmured to the other apprentice.

"She's probably sleeping," Mousepaw joked, though there was an edge to his usually cheery tone. Upon entering the apprentices' den, they found out that she wasn't in there. Mousepaw let out a nearly inaudible gasp and quickly exited the den. Spottedpaw followed, her worry building up.

"Mosspaw!" she called out when she exited the den. Together with Mousepaw, she searched around the edge of the camp, calling her name occasionally. When they didn't find her anywhere, her worry only increased.

"Hiya!" Mosspaw's accented chirp sounded from behind them, scaring them both out of their fur.

"Where in the name of StarClan were you?" Mousepaw demanded, his voice dripping with relief. "We searched everywhere!"

"I was only in the nursery playing with the kits, silly," Mosspaw responded, seemingly unaware of the danger she could have been in. "Did something happen?"

"The Gorge attacked the sunhigh patrol," Spottedpaw explained before Mousepaw could respond. "I wouldn't put it past them to send more warriors to the camp for an attack. Some of them would die for Deadeye." Mosspaw immediately began pacing where she

stood.

"We should defend the camp, then!" she burst out proudly.

"Yeah! No smelly Gorge cat will get past me!" Mousepaw agreed, rearing up and swiping at the sky. Spottedpaw couldn't help a chuckle that escaped; their confidence relaxed her a bit, though she still worried about Deadeye sending cats to the camp.

"Spottedpaw!" Muddapple called from the medicine den entrance. "I need your help with something, would you mind coming here?"

"Sure," Spottedpaw mewed, suddenly feeling awkward. As she wondered what he could possibly need the help of an apprentice for, Spottedpaw realized that Mosspaw and Mousepaw were trailing after her.

"Mosspaw, Mousepaw, I think I recall Juniperstorm telling me that her kits are already quite restless. Why don't you two go keep them occupied?" Muddapple sent them a deliberate glance, though it didn't seem to land with the siblings.

"Oh, okay!" Mosspaw chirped. "I reckon Aspenkit and Palekit are getting rowdy again—they were bouncing off the walls when I played with 'em! They sure are getting big fast."

"They are!" Mousepaw mewed in agreement. The two apprentices tumbled off to the nursery together, the odd-eyed tom sending Spottedpaw a last glance as they did so. Spottedpaw gulped and padded toward Muddapple slowly. The golden-eyed tom kept his gaze on her as she approached, and, when she drew nearer, turned around and led her into the medicine den.

"So, what is it you needed help with?" Spottedpaw questioned him when she entered the medicine den. She gazed around the den slowly—it didn't look like anything needed sorting, cleaning, or organizing.

Muddapple fixed her with a serious gaze. "We need to talk." *So that's what this is about,* Spottedpaw thought, though she wasn't

surprised.

"About what?" she murmured in response, trying to play dumb.

"First of all," Muddapple mewed with narrowed eyes, "there's the question of who Shadestar was trying to warn you about. Surely one of the three is Deadeye, another is this apparent heir of his—but who is the heir?"

"Oh, that," Spottedpaw meowed dryly. "I'll admit, I try not to think about it."

"You– That's not a choice you get to make," the medicine cat apprentice retorted, his eyes widening. Spottedpaw resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"Why not?" she snapped, feeling her patience wither away. She wasn't about to let Muddapple bother her about this—Shadestar was bad enough, with how often he interrupted her dreams.

"Listen," Muddapple spoke slowly, separating his words deliberately. "This is important. Deadeye is growing more unstable and demanding by the day. This– All of this fighting is going to end up turning into a full-blown war. He's already declared war on BlazeClan, if you don't remember. A war with the Gorge, with the state the Clans are in, would end us all if *you* don't start taking this seriously." His tone grew more furious with each word, his eyes burning into Spottedpaw's pelt.

"I didn't ask for this!" Spottedpaw burst out, lashing her tail.

"Nobody does." Muddapple stepped closer and leaned his head forward slightly, his whiskers nearly brushing Spottedpaw's muzzle. "Whining about it won't do you any good—Shadestar clearly chose you, so it's your duty to rise up and help us find a solution that keeps the Clans intact."

"Aren't there more pressing matters at hand?" Spottedpaw was quick to deflect the topic, finding it harder to keep her temper controlled. "Grassheart is in danger out there!"

"All the more reason to figure this out." Muddapple's mew

quickly escalated to a snarl, his golden eyes glinting with anger. A shadow fell over the light that shone through the entrance of the den, and the two quarreling cats turned to see a steely-gazed Brightpelt.

"That's enough bickering out of the two of you," she snapped, her turquoise gaze flitting between them. Muddapple silenced himself immediately, though his eyes remained furious. Brightpelt turned to Spottedpaw and softened her tone. "Spottedpaw, I understand your frustration—we wouldn't wish such a burden on anyone, but it's clear that your ancestors chose you to fix their mistakes."

"Shadestar always says that," Spottedpaw grumbled bitterly, looking away from the medicine cats.

"Says what?" Brightpelt blinked in surprise, but leaned forward curiously.

"That I have to *'undo what has been done,'*" Spottedpaw muttered. "I can guess what it means—I saw . . . I had a *dream* where I saw Crowstar killing Ivorystar, and I've been told that things haven't been great ever since that happened."

"That is true," Brightpelt spoke slowly, watching the apprentice closely. "Has Crowstar appeared in any other dreams?"

"W-Well . . . he's spoken to me, actually," Spottedpaw admitted, unaware that Brightpelt had begun to coax more information out of her. "It was more like taunting, though." The two medicine cats exchanged a glance; the smaller, white-furred molly looking satisfied while the brown tabby tom looked shocked.

The entrance of the den rustled wildly, and Cottontuft and Ploverfern burst in, carrying Grassheart's limp body between them. Spottedpaw leapt back, her heart dropping when she saw the sight of him. The warrior's pale fur was coated with blood, and his half-opened eyes were glossy. After a moment, Spottedpaw realized that she couldn't even hear his breath; the deputy could already be dead.

"Bring him here," Brightpelt ordered without missing a beat. She

motioned to an empty moss-filled nest behind her and moved to it, her gaze dark. Muddapple rushed off without a word, disappearing inside the smaller thicket where they stored herbs. Once the warriors laid their deputy down, Brightpelt pushed them out of her way and lowered her ear to Grassheart's body.

"Is he alive?" Cottontuft breathed after an excruciating moment of silence.

"Barely," Brightpelt responded curtly. "All of you, out, now. I'll do what I can to save him, but I can't guarantee anything." Together, Cottontuft and Ploverfern retreated from the den. Spottedpaw followed close behind them, still dazed from the sight of Grassheart.

When she returned to the clearing, she was met with the worried gazes of all the warriors. Many of them were beaten and bloody—Fernwillow was relatively unscathed, though her sister, Dapplecloud, had blood speckled throughout her tortoiseshell fur. Hollyheart's white fur was coated with blood; upon looking closer, Spottedpaw saw that blood seeped out of a deep wound on her shoulder.

Next to her sat Fishstar; though he was unscathed, his fur was covered in blood from helping injured cats back to camp. On the leader's other side sat Brackenclaw. The muscular tom lacked any obvious injuries, though he shared a bloodied pelt, just like his Clanmates. Spottedpaw glanced toward the nursery and saw that Mousepaw and Mosspaw were peeking out, their eyes round with horror.

"Do you think Grassheart will be okay?" Though Mousepaw tried to whisper it, his voice echoed around the deadly silent camp.

Hazelberry sent her apprentice a withering look; it was a glare that Mousepaw shrunk away from, his ears flicking in embarrassment. Spottedpaw padded away from the gathered warriors, unsure of how to feel. She was worried about Grassheart, and desperately hoped that he survived—but she was also *furious*. She wanted to find out which ex-campmate of hers had done this, and . . . well, she didn't know *what* she wanted to do, she just knew

that she was seething with anger. Spottedpaw dug her claws into the grass beneath her, tearing at it desperately with her eyes fixated on the medicine den.

After what felt like an eternity, there was movement at the entrance of the den. The warriors of SwiftClan leaned forward in anticipation, each of them perking their ears forward. Brightpelt emerged slowly, her gaze wavering as she struggled to meet the stares of her Clanmates.

"Grassheart is dead."

Immediately, Fishstar bowed his head in mourning. Without uttering a single word, the gathered warriors wove around one another, their faces dark. Spottedpaw twitched her whiskers as Brackenclaw leaned forward and whispered something to the leader, and then the two of them disappeared into the medicine den, only to reappear moments later with the deputy's limp body supported between them. Spottedpaw blinked and, for the first time, realized how numb she felt to his death—her worry from before had dissipated along with her anger, and the feelings left a strange void inside her chest.

Spottedpaw padded forward slowly, careful not to shove her way forward, though getting close enough to pay her respects to the deputy. Fishstar and Brackenclaw rested Grassheart's body by the broken stump, immediately crouching nearby and lowering their heads in mourning.

"You had a good run, old friend," Fishstar murmured softly. "You deserve a rest." Spottedpaw blinked and hung to the back of the crowd as cats milled by to pay their respects. Ploverfern and Longstep sat right beside Fishstar, their noses brushing their deceased brother's fur sadly. One by one, cats padded up to the lifeless body, whispering words of farewell before retreating to the edge of the crowd.

"Rest well, Grassheart," Spottedpaw heard Mousepaw murmur ahead of her. "I'm sorry you couldn't see us become warriors." The golden tabby remembered how, just a few sunrises prior, the odd-eyed apprentice had bragged about being related to the deputy.

Next to Mousepaw, she saw Mosspaw standing with her tail drooped—for once, the she-cat said nothing.

When Spottedpaw finally reached Grassheart's body, she hesitated. The emotionless void in her chest frightened her, and she suddenly had no idea what to say to honor the deputy. Briefly, she thought of how Shadestar couldn't contact most cats from the Gorge; even though the ancestors had found Brownpaw, she wondered if that situation could be reversed, leaving cats to wander in the afterlife instead of finding their way to StarClan.

"May you find your way to StarClan, and may your rest be long and uninterrupted." Before she realized what she was saying, Spottedpaw had spoken. She blinked, surprised at herself, and slowly retreated to the edge of the crowd. The Clan continued to sit by the dead deputy, their heads lowered and their shoulders hunched.

Slowly, the day slipped by, though few seemed to notice. Even Juniperstorm's kits had come out of the nursery to watch the crowd curiously. *Even the kits know what's going on here,* Spottedpaw thought grimly. *All of this loss and heartache, this is Deadeye's doing.* Despite her argument with Muddapple, Spottedpaw *wanted* to stop Deadeye—she just didn't understand what a mere apprentice could do.

Before Spottedpaw noticed, the sun had already begun to set. Some cats had retreated to their dens for the night, though many still lingered. Spottedpaw glanced around, looking for Mousepaw; when she saw that he and his sister were sitting together, still mourning their uncle, she decided to leave them be.

The apprentice looked back to Fishstar, noticing that the tabby leader hadn't moved from his position. Mirepelt slowly shifted to approach their leader, his eyes glittering with uncertainty.

"Dad, come on," the brown-furred tom whispered. "You have to appoint a new deputy soon." Spottedpaw had to lean forward to hear him, but when she did, she blinked in surprise. *Even a grouchy, stern warrior like Mirepelt calls his parents by informal names,* she thought curiously. She looked to the setting sun, remembering how,

according to the Clan code, leaders must appoint a new deputy before moonhigh.

For a few heartbeats, Fishstar didn't respond, and an uneasy silence rested over the clearing. Spottedpaw leaned forward and glanced around; when she did, she saw that most cats were glancing at one another. When whispers began to spread, Fishstar rose to his paws and leaped onto the broken tree stump.

"Grassheart was a dear friend, and a loyal deputy," Fishstar spoke, his voice quivering and his gaze weary. "His name will be honored for moons to come—the rest of time, if time allows it. As the code I am bound to states, I must choose a new deputy before moonhigh." Fishstar let his gaze sweep the cats below him, pausing when it reached Hollyheart, and again when it reached Brackenclaw. "Through my mourning, a decision has been made. Brackenclaw will be our new deputy. I trust him to help me keep the order of the Clan, and have faith in him as a potential leader of SwiftClan. May Grassheart's spirit watch over from StarClan and bless my decision." Fishstar raised his muzzle to the darkening sky and shut his eyes, and the rest of the cats did the same.

Spottedpaw watched awkwardly, not sure what they were doing or if she should follow their lead. Before she could decide, the Clan finished, and cats began to retreat to their den. As they passed Brackenclaw, Spottedpaw heard them murmur words of encouragement and approval. The dappled apprentice rose to her paws and skirted along the edge of the cats, heading to the apprentices' den for the night. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted movement from Mousepaw and Mosspaw, and figured that they would be joining her soon, as well.

"I thought he would have picked Hollyheart." Spottedpaw flicked her ears as she passed Cottontuft and Hazelberry and heard the two warriors murmuring amongst one another.

"She's much more level-headed than Brackenclaw," Hazelberry murmured in agreement. "He can be just as short-tempered as Mirepelt, if not moreso."

Spottedpaw perked her ears curiously, surprised at their hushed

whispers. *Everyone seemed to approve of Brackenclaw being the new deputy,* she thought. *Are there more that disagree with it?* When she glanced back at the other warriors, she noticed confliction glittering in countless gazes. The apprentice hesitated a moment more before heading into the den. *Hopefully Brackenclaw proves to be more level-headed than they say.*

Chapter 22

A cool breeze swept over the moorland, chilling the SwiftClan cats as they trekked across their territory. The full moon illuminated the group of cats, casting large shadows across the grass beneath them. Spottedpaw padded at the front of the crowd beside Fishstar, her golden pelt appearing oddly luminous next to her mentor's brown tabby fur.

On the opposite side of Fishstar padded Brackenclaw, the muscular warrior's green eyes glinting in the darkness. Behind the leader, Brightpelt and Muddapple padded in front of the crowd of warriors, speaking in hushed whispers to one another as they followed Fishstar to the Gathering clearing. Spottedpaw angled her ears, trying to pick up a hint of what they were saying, though it was no use—the medicine cats kept their voices too low for anyone else to hear.

Once they reached the edge of the sandy hollow, Fishstar paused. His green eyes glittered with anticipation, and he held his tail high to tell the cats behind him to halt. Spottedpaw paused and watched the leader expectantly, ready for him to lead the Clan into the clearing. Instead of doing that, he turned to her.

"Remember," he murmured softly to her, his voice nearly inaudible, "stay in the hedges that border the clearing. We can't let Deadeye see you here." Spottedpaw groaned internally but nodded. She knew he was right; there was no telling what Deadeye would do if she was discovered here. The apprentice imagined that both he and Frostheart were fuming with her disappearance, and she didn't doubt that they'd break the truce to detain her. When Fishstar led the Clan into the clearing and clambered up the Gathering Stones, Spottedpaw fell behind and weaved her way through the prickly hedges. All of the leaders were already perched atop the ancient Tallrock, and the leaders of the Clans murmured amongst one another while Deadeye raked his eyes over the clearing scornfully. The deputies were scattered along the smaller Gathering

Stones, their eyes all glittering uneasily. Below them, the medicine cats clustered together, refusing to include Frozenleaf and Shortpaw in their whispers.

Spottedpaw gazed over to where the apprentices of all Clans gathered, searching desperately for her siblings and friends. As she searched, she only saw Echopaw, and Spottedpaw felt her heart drop. *One of them has to be here,* she told herself firmly. After a few more moments of searching, she spotted the familiar pelts of Nightpaw and Pearlpaw among the apprentices from other Clans. The two sisters sat near one another as the rest of the apprentices kept a bit of a distance, though when Spottedpaw crept closer, she noticed Echopaw sending them curious glances. *It's not like they're all trained killers,* Spottedpaw mused, holding back a dry chuckle. Then, remembering Pearlpaw's snake-like demeanor, Spottedpaw realized she didn't blame the apprentices for keeping their distance.

Spottedpaw slowly crept through the hedges, careful not to snap any twigs or rustle the leaves. Once she got closer to the apprentices, she glanced from side to side. *I have to get Nightpaw's attention without alerting anyone else,* she reminded herself. *Hopefully she can hear me if I just whisper.*

"Psst, Nightpaw," she hissed quietly, careful to keep her voice down. Spottedpaw didn't want anybody else seeing or hearing her—especially not Pearlpaw. The pale apprentice would surely go right to Dustpaw if she saw the golden apprentice, or even Deadeye, if she was feeling mean enough.

Nightpaw flicked her ears, though she didn't move from her spot. Spottedpaw could see her eyes flitting around curiously, and she crept closer to the edge of the clearing. The golden tabby glanced back and forth to make sure nobody else was within earshot, and then she leaned forward to call to her friend again.

"Over here!" Spottedpaw immediately shrunk back into the bushes when she said it, scared that she'd gotten too daring. Nightpaw slowly rose to her paws and inched back toward the hedges and, to Spottedpaw's relief, nobody else showed any signs of noticing. She watched as her freckle-furred friend sniffed the branches hesitantly and blinked in surprise. Her eyes shone with a

mixture of confusion and disbelief, as if she couldn't believe the scent she'd detected. Nightpaw quickly climbed into the hedges, almost colliding with Spottedpaw and rattling the branches around them.

At first, the grey apprentice reeled back in disbelief. Her amber eyes glittered and she inspected Spottedpaw slowly, as if the golden apprentice wasn't real. Spottedpaw shuffled her paws and offered a sheepish smile, waiting for Nightpaw to say something. The apprentice kept staring at Spottedpaw, opening and closing her mouth again as if she couldn't find the words to speak.

"Y-You're alive . . . ." Nightpaw murmured softly, blinking a few times as if she still didn't believe it. "You're alive! Oh my goodness, Spottedpaw, you're— you're alive! How? I thought you were dead!" She rushed forward, touching her nose to Spottedpaw affectionately. Spottedpaw blinked in surprise and tried to swallow the warm, fuzzy feeling that rose in her chest when Nightpaw's whiskers brushed against her muzzle. She wanted to close her eyes and stay like this forever, but she knew she couldn't.

"It's a long story," Spottedpaw croaked out, her ears heating up in embarrassment. "How are things at the Gorge? I know when I left, Deadeye was . . . well . . . ." The happiness quickly faded from Nightpaw's eyes, replaced by a sheen of unease. Spottedpaw felt her heart drop at the sight, and she almost regretted asking.

"Not good," Nightpaw muttered, glancing into the clearing. "Molestrike passed away, and Dapplepaw did, too. Frozenleaf and Shortstep think that Blackpaw and Sunpaw don't have much time left; they said they're running out of herbs to treat them. Deadeye isn't taking it well at all; what you see on the Tallrock is the most composed he's been since you escaped."

"Shortstep?" Spottedpaw echoed and glanced at the medicine cats briefly, not batting an eye at the death of the elder and apprentice. *They were so fragile when I left,* she thought, *I'm surprised the other two lasted this long with the herb shortage.*

"Yeah," Nightpaw cheered up a bit when the conversation shifted from the dead elder and apprentice. "Frozenleaf gave him his full

name at the half moon!" Spottedpaw glanced at the group of apprentices, furrowing her brows.

"W-What about Riverpaw? I don't see him with the apprentices." Spottedpaw almost regretted asking about him, worried that the worst had happened to her sibling. The death of Brownpaw still rested in the back of her mind, along with the death of Hawkscar; Deadeye clearly had no regard for the safety of others.

"Oh, right! Your siblings got their warrior names a few sunrises ago, actually!" Nightpaw waved her tail when she announced it, and Spottedpaw felt an unexpected wave of pride course through her. She didn't even care that they'd received their names before her. "Deadeye should be announcing them tonight, actually; their names are Fernspring, Dustleap, and Riverdash."

"They're okay, then?" Spottedpaw mewed hopefully. She immediately searched the crowd, hoping to find her littermates now that she knew they weren't apprentices.

"Yes, they're fine," Nightpaw purred in amusement. "Dustleap is faring the best of them all; he spends a lot of time with Deadeye, just like Greyheart does, and Deadeye seems equally interested in him. Riverdash has seemed nervous ever since you fled, but he and Fernspring are doing well. Your sister has gotten even closer to Shortstep, you know."

Spottedpaw gave an amused snort. "Of course she is, she's so hopeless . . . how are you, though?" Spottedpaw paused and gave Nightpaw a searching glance. "Are you . . . doing okay?" Nightpaw blinked in surprise and fidgeted shyly.

"W-Well, I'm doing a lot better now," the slender apprentice murmured softly. "Things are getting scary, though—" Yowls from the Tallrock called their attention, and the two mollies sent their attention to the leaders. Harestar stepped forward with a nod to the other Clan leaders, her tail drooping.

"A Gathering or two ago, I reported that Kestrelwing and Sagewillow were attacked by a dog that the Twolegs let loose on our territory. A few sunrises ago, they both passed away from an

infection caused by their injuries. Petalheart has stepped forward as our new deputy." The leader's amber eyes shone with grief, and murmurs of condolences spread throughout the clearing. "Despite our losses, we're celebrating two new warriors; Whitebriar and Frostpool." The warriors in the clearing cheered their new name, while a few called out congratulations to Petalheart on becoming deputy. Spottedpaw glanced at Nightpaw as Harestar took a few steps back and nodded to Kinkstar.

"RushClan is healthy," the brown leader called out, his voice surprisingly curt. "The river's water has receded, and, as long as we don't get any late-season rains, there should be no chance of flooding. Our apprentice, Wolfpaw, has earned his warrior name, and is now known as Wolfwatcher." Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes when the clearing called out the warrior's name; Kinkstar shuffled backward quickly, his gaze flitting around distrustfully. Spottedpaw looked closer and saw that the brown-furred tom looked skinnier than the last time she attended a Gathering, and his gaze looked haunted. She didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as Heatherstar stepped forward, her tail held high. The black leader let her blue gaze sweep the crowd before she spoke.

"BlazeClan also has a new warrior to announce. Everybody, welcome Smallmoon to our ranks!" Heatherstar called, pausing and sweeping her gaze around the clearing. Spottedpaw resisted the urge to join in; she knew someone would hear her, so she silently wished him luck as a warrior. "We've been patrolling our borders stringently since the loss of Heatherstorm, and I am happy to report that we've had no further issues."

Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes. She wondered if the declaration of war at the last Gathering and the battle on the border shortly afterwards were all part of Deadeye's plan to put the *other* Clans at ease, in an attempt to take advantage of their carelessness. She searched the crowd for her BlazeClan friends and spotted Jayleaf, Swallowclaw, and Firthistle all sitting together, scanning the crowds. *Sorry, guys,* she thought sadly. *I can't come see you yet. Maybe at the next Gathering.*

Fishstar took a deep breath and stepped forward on the Tallrock, calling attention to him. "A few sunrises ago, we also lost our

deputy, Grassheart, in an ambush on one of our border patrols along the southern border." Fishstar lowered his head briefly, his eyes glittering with grief. "Luckily, few others sustained serious injuries. Brackenclaw has been chosen as our new deputy." The SwiftClan leader ended his announcement abruptly and stepped back as murmurs of surprise and sadness swept through the clearing.

On the other side of the ancient boulder, Deadeye looked smug. When she snuck another glance at Nightpaw, Spottedpaw saw that her friend looked as shocked as the rest of the Clans sounded.

"I had no idea," the speckled grey apprentice whispered. "I mean, I knew there was a fight at the border—Dustleap was bragging about it and he was covered in blood for at least a sunset, but nobody spread any details." Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes at the mention of her brother, but she didn't have time to dwell on it. Deadeye swaggered forward on the Tallrock, his eyes glittering menacingly.

"The Gorge is proud to announce that more new warriors have joined our ranks!" he called, his voice sending chills down Spottedpaw's spine. She gulped as memories from the night she escaped resurfaced in her mind. "Fernspring, Riverdash, and Dustleap! We also lost our eldest campmate, Molestrike, to a nasty bout of greencough, but these new warriors have proven that we're stronger than ever." Spottedpaw noticed that he didn't mention the death of Dapplepaw and flicked her tail curiously. She sent another glance at Nightpaw and saw that her eyes glittered with uncertainty.

"Hey," Spottedpaw murmured softly, inching closer to her friend.

"What . . . ?" Nightpaw met her gaze hesitantly. Spottedpaw took a deep breath, preparing for what she was about to suggest.

"What if I said I could get you out of there?" Hope welled up within Spottedpaw, and she hoped her friend would jump to the suggestion.

"I don't know," Nightpaw mewed softly, and Spottedpaw felt her

heart drop at the anticipation in her friend's eyes. "I couldn't leave Rabbitpaw after what happened with Brownpaw, or Pearlpaw, as frustrating as she can be."

"What if I said I could get *all* of you out of there? Everyone. I mean it." Spottedpaw grew more serious than ever and gave her friend a hard stare.

Nightpaw blinked and began to stammer. "W-What? I mean . . . we're safe here, Spottedpaw. I can't really ask for more than that." Spottedpaw dropped her jaw in astonishment, but quickly realized that she used to harbor similar feelings. The apprentice narrowed her eyes, a fresh wave of determination surging through her.

"Nightpaw, believe in me. I swear I will find a way to get you out," Spottedpaw promised, slapping a nearby branch with her paw. "Tell Riverdash to meet me at the half moon, on the border where SwiftClan and the Gorge meet this clearing. Now that he's a warrior, it'll be less suspicious to leave during the night. In the time until then, I can work out a plan to get you out. All of you—whoever wants to leave, I'll help."

Nightpaw's gaze drifted to the clearing and she flicked her ears. Spottedpaw twitched her whiskers and followed her gaze curiously. When she did, she saw the familiar pelts of her siblings for the first time. The golden cat leaned forward and inspected them curiously. Fernspring's fluffy ginger fur was sleek and unscathed; Riverdash's wasn't as well-kept as their sister's but he looked unharmed. Dustleap, on the other hand, was covered in old gashes and scars. Briefly, Spottedpaw thought of the heir that Deadeye was supposedly picking, and felt fear prick at her heart. Before she could say anything, Nightpaw spoke again, her voice shaking Spottedpaw's mind free of her worries.

"I'll do my best to convince Riverdash to meet you," she whispered, her gaze uncertain once again. "I'll try to do it without anyone eavesdropping, as well. Deadeye has gotten more paranoid since you left." Spottedpaw frowned and brought her gaze back to her friend.

"Speaking of eavesdropping, do you know who—"

"Who listened when you told me about your dreams? No," Nightpaw finished the sentence, looking at the ground sadly. "I can't think of anyone who would want to do that to you. I was so horrified when that happened . . . I was *so* scared for you, Spottedpaw. Ever since then, Deadeye's been talking about sending search parties to the Clans—you aren't safe here. When he finds you, he's going to *kill* you."

"I know you were scared," Spottedpaw murmured, leaning forward to brush her muzzle against Nightpaw's ear gently. "I was scared, too. Terrified for my life, honestly, but I'm okay now. I promise, I'm safe where I'm staying. I'll . . . I'll find a way to get you out of there, Nightpaw, I promise." Spottedpaw felt her heart twist in her chest as she nuzzled her friend a bit more. *I'd gladly fight Deadeye myself if it meant Nightpaw could be happy and safe,* she told herself firmly. *I'll do whatever Muddapple asks of me, I don't care what it is!* She didn't want the Gathering to end, but she knew that they'd be leaving soon.

As if she'd cued it with her thoughts, the Clan leaders hopped down from Tallrock and started to escort their Clans away. Deadeye paused, his gaze tearing over the clearing. He raked his claws along the stone, creating a painful screeching noise that demanded attention. The cats of the Clans muttered in annoyance and stopped, looking to the source of the disturbing noise.

"I forgot to mention," he started, his voice snide. "If anyone happens to see a pesky golden runt, be a doll and let me or my patrols know. She attacked one of my warriors and, well, she needs to answer for her crimes." Spottedpaw shuddered at the tone of his voice, fear threatening to rise in her throat. Deadeye finally hopped down from the Tallrock, his sharp claws glinting in the light of the full moon. In the crowd, Spottedpaw recognized Frostheart lifting his head high. Across his nose rested a fresh, fleshy scar; Spottedpaw winced at the sight of it. *Did I do that?* she thought, partially disgusted with herself.

When Deadeye started leading the Gorge away, Nightpaw rose to her feet. She sent Spottedpaw a longing glance—a gaze that Spottedpaw returned—before dashing off after her campmates. Spottedpaw sighed as she watched her friend leave for a few

moments. After a couple heartbeats, she turned around to find Fishstar. Spottedpaw nosed her way through the prickly hedges until she found Fishstar waiting for her outside of the clearing.

"Don't leave my side once we leave," Fishstar muttered in her ear. "Even at the Gathering, it looked like many of Deadeye's warriors were looking for you—along with that announcement he made at the end, we must be very careful."

Spottedpaw nodded slowly and started following him and her Clan back to their camp. "Fishstar," she mewed softly with a glance over her shoulder. "Would you . . . be against sheltering more cats from the Gorge?"

"What?" Fishstar blinked in surprise and gave his apprentice a quizzical look. "I mean, I certainly wouldn't oppose it—Spottedpaw, do you know just what you're suggesting, though? We might as well face Deadeye head on!"

"I . . . I know I've been against it so far," Spottedpaw murmured sheepishly, her gaze locked on the ground as they walked a little ways behind the rest of the Clan. "B-But if it means I could ensure the safety of my friends, I think I'd be willing to consider it again." She couldn't bring herself to meet Fishstar's gaze; she was too scared he'd decline offering her friends the shelter they needed.

"How about we talk it over with Brightpelt and Muddapple," Fishstar murmured softly after a few moments of silence. "I don't see anything wrong with it, but they might have other ideas." Spottedpaw nodded hopefully, his response sparking a bit of relief inside her. The two of them sped up until they trotted alongside their Clan, and Spottedpaw suddenly found herself ready to get to the camp and get to sleep.

Chapter 23

Spottedpaw sat in a moonlit clearing, peering around in an attempt to lift the confusion that fogged her mind. A river flowed carelessly through the clearing, babbling gently; the noise soothed her. The golden apprentice rose to her paws and took a few pawsteps forward, as if to inspect the river, when a faint movement in the sky caught her eye. She turned her head to the sky, noticing that the stars littering the deep blue screen shifted from their positions-barely enough to demand attention, but just enough to be noticeable to a curious eye. Spottedpaw narrowed her eyes again, and that's when she saw it.

Three distinct silhouettes were outlined in the stars, their bodies embracing a semi-transparent, white sheen that seemed to glow. Spottedpaw immediately recognized the shapes from Shadestar's message at Starfalls, and she fought the panic that rose in her chest, though it was no use-the figure in the center, what Spottedpaw had realized to be whoever Deadeye chose as his heir, glowed much brighter than the other two. With a start, Spottedpaw noticed that the glow from it was increasing more with the time that passed. She lost her fight with the growing panic inside of her, and it engulfed her, sending chills down her spine.

Suddenly, the heir shifted, as if it were a living and breathing cat, way up in the night sky. *Silverpelt is coming to life,* Spottedpaw thought, so panicked that even the voice in her head was breathless. It opened menacing, glowing eyes, much like the eyes of many StarClan cats-no pupils to indicate where it looked, but somehow, Spottedpaw knew it was staring straight at her. It leaped down from the sky, falling straight to where Spottedpaw stood in the mysterious clearing. The air seemed to grow thicker as it neared the earth, and when it landed, tremors coursed through the ground. Spottedpaw staggered a bit and coughed on the dust that it sent flying into the air.

Once the dust had settled, Spottedpaw saw that the enormous,

starry figure had landed on the opposite side of the river. Its front paws were placed firmly in the river and, to Spottedpaw's surprise, the water around it began to flow redder than blood. The sight made the apprentice's stomach churn uneasily, though another shifting movement from the silhouette caused her to snap her attention back to it.

"Sacrifices must be made to correct our wrongdoings."

The voice ripped through the air, nearly deafening Spottedpaw. Though her gaze was fixed on the heir, she knew that it hadn't spoken the words that seemed to shake the entire world. The frightening figure, however, paid no mind to the ominous voice. It fixed Spottedpaw with a stern glare and, after a dreadful moment of waiting, launched itself directly at her. Just as its massive paws neared her, Spottedpaw jerked awake with a start in the apprentices' den.

Those dreams never fail to make me feel ill, she thought as she struggled to her paws, swallowing down the sick feeling that rose from her panic. Spottedpaw struggled to get air into her lungs, almost feeling winded by the dreams that she was certain Shadestar sent her. *He really should just be outright with what he's saying-as if I can recognize some giant, starry cat!* Spottedpaw shook her head crossly and shakily made her way out of the den, into the main clearing of the Clan. Two familiar grey apprentices caught her eye, and she gratefully made her way over to them.

"Hey, Spottedpaw!" Mosspaw chirped, dragging out the end of her name. "Mousepaw and I have been coming up with new tricks and moves! Wanna see?"

Spottedpaw blinked and glanced between the two of them. Dust, grass, and mud covered their fur, and Spottedpaw realized that they must have been falling about in the clearing. "Sure, why not," she murmured hesitantly, getting comfortable where she stood.

"I call this the Twoleg stance!" Mousepaw immediately burst out and reared up onto his hindlegs, teetering back and forth dangerously as he struggled to keep his balance. "It's great for- for uh . . . well, I never really thought that far ahead . . . ." Spottedpaw

held back a snort of dry amusement, her mind already drifting back to the remnants of the dream that clung to her mind. As Mousepaw and Mosspaw began to bicker over the use of their original stances, Spottedpaw's gaze drifted to the medicine den.

Brightpelt and Muddapple sat just outside the den alongside Fishstar, and they looked to be murmuring amongst themselves seriously. Spottedpaw wondered if the tabby leader was telling them what she'd said after the Gathering; the idea wasn't so crazy, but she'd admit that it was rather outlandish regardless. The apprentice took a deep breath to ground her emotions and rose to her paws hesitantly.

"Excuse me," she murmured quietly to the siblings, breaking away from them and awkwardly padding up to the older cats. It didn't take them long to notice her approach, and she quickly felt her ears burn when their gazes rested on her.

"Is there something you need, Spottedpaw?" Brightpelt spoke first, her turquoise eyes glittering and her whiskers twitching quizzically.

"Y-Yeah, actually," Spottedpaw stuttered, feeling more awkward than ever. "Is there a chance we could talk? I-In private, maybe . . . ." The medicine cats exchanged surprise glances but spared no time leading her into their den, Fishstar trailing along behind them.

"Did something happen?" Brightpelt leaned forward once they were situated in the back of the den. The scent of herbs overwhelmed Spottedpaw's senses, and she dug her nails into the ground carefully. *Just tell them, mouse-brain,* she cursed to herself sourly, letting out a deep breath. Both of the medicine cats looked intrigued by her sudden compliance, while Fishstar just twitched his whiskers knowingly. With a flick of her ears, Spottedpaw decided to make her move before she could change her mind again.

"I had another dream," Spottedpaw blurted out. "I was in a clearing with a river splitting it in half, and the silhouettes of those three cats were in the stars again. Deadeye, his heir, and someone else-t-though I still can't figure out who the heir or third cat are. The heir jumped out of the sky and made the ground shake, and the river ran red. Then, I heard this ominous voice, and it- it attacked me."

"You've certainly come around," Muddapple commented with a flick of his tail. Spottedpaw looked at him and prepared herself to meet a harsh gaze, but his golden eyes were only curious. After holding his gaze for a moment, Spottedpaw hesitantly began to explain herself.

"I- I want to help them," she mumbled, her voice low. "I know I was against it, but . . . if it means I can help my friends, I'll work with you. I'll do anything for them."

"Well, then, about that dream," Muddapple wasted no time getting to the point, and Spottedpaw had to hold back a mirthless laugh. *Of course he wants to get right into it,* she thought, semi-bitterly. *He's all about business, no time to rest with him.*

"Obviously it means the heir is becoming a threat," Spottedpaw struggled to keep a friendly tone-she wouldn't let the younger medicine cat continue to irritate her, no matter how silly the reason. "It's clear enough, and I know I have to figure out their identity soon. Are these kinds of dreams usually so . . . intense, though?"

"Sometimes," Brightpelt spoke this time, not giving her apprentice a chance to speak. "Usually, they're very vague-you must have a very strong natural connection to StarClan. Any medicine cat would be jealous to possess such a trait."

"Don't forget that she's been through a lot," Fishstar spoke for the first time, his eyes fixed on Spottedpaw. "I wouldn't doubt that your experiences have a part to play in intensifying all of your dreams, even normal ones." Spottedpaw shuddered, remembering how nightmares of Hawkscar's death often merged into visits from Crowstar or Shadestar.

"It doesn't help that these stupid dead cats keep harassing me at night," Spottedpaw muttered softly. She realized too late that she'd said it too loudly.

"They aren't stupid," Brightpelt mewed gently, a tone of warning coming from her.

"Well, if they really wanted to help, they could have warned me

about my mentor's death," she retorted, trying her hardest to keep the bitterness from her tone.

"Maybe they did, and you just didn't see the meaning of the message," Muddapple countered carefully, his tone firm. Spottedpaw froze when he said that, the memory of something gnawing at her mind. Her expression blanked as she tried to figure out what was resurfacing. After a heartbeat, visions of the hawk she chased through the storm flooded into her mind. She remembered how friendly it was to her, and when she saw it get crushed by a dead, scarred tree. Suddenly, Spottedpaw felt sick to her stomach, realizing exactly what that dream was about. *It was right in front of me,* she thought desperately. *I could have prevented so much if I would just open my eyes.*

"Spottedpaw?" Fishstar stepped forward, worry evident on his face.

"Did I say something?" Muddapple asked quietly. Brightpelt nudged him harshly and he gave a soft grunt in response.

"N-No, I'm fine, really," Spottedpaw responded quickly, though she was stuck wondering what other signs she'd missed. "I- I was just thinking of an idea I wanted to pass by you guys, that's all . . . t-to help my friends. I spoke to a friend at the Gathering. Don't worry, she won't rat me out," she added hurriedly when Fishstar's expression changed into one of worry, "She's trustworthy. At the half moon, I'll be meeting my brother, Riverdash on the border near the Gathering Stones. I r-really wanna start . . . sneaking some out. Anyone who doesn't feel safe there."

The other three cats exchanged uncertain glances, and Spottedpaw's heart dropped. *I knew it was a far-fetched idea,* she thought dejectedly. *They've gotta at least consider it, right?* She glanced between them all hesitantly, waiting for some kind of response.

"Well, it isn't a great idea," Muddapple mewed slowly, only confirming her worries, "but this could give us an edge on Deadeye." Brightpelt shot him a wary glance and Fishstar cleared his throat deliberately.

"It could be dangerous in the end," he confirmed. "More cats

disappearing will lead to an angrier Deadeye. I'd be willing to bring Brackenclaw and my senior warriors into the conversation, however. If they agree, I'm fine with sheltering more of them." Spottedpaw nodded eagerly, and she knew that her face lit up from her relief.

"He'd be angrier," she murmured slowly, "but perhaps that volatility could lead to weakness, which gives us a chance to end it. If Riverdash agrees to help-and I've got a feeling he will-we could get plenty out before Deadeye has a chance to kill off the less loyal."

"You can't go alone to this meeting," Fishstar added decidedly. "I can follow behind you at a distance, or send one or two of the senior warriors." Spottedpaw agreed hesitantly; she'd wanted to handle this on her own, but she understood the sentiment.

Brightpelt and Muddapple exchanged conflicted glances, emotions warring in their eyes as if they were deciding the right thing to do. Fishstar fixed Spottedpaw with a proud gaze, his expression thoughtful. After a moment, he stood and beckoned to Spottedpaw, leading her out of the den and into the clearing.

"Birchtail, Hazelberry," the leader called out with Spottedpaw lingering at his side. "I'd like a word with you two. Spottedpaw, you did good today-what you decided in there, and how you handled it. Go rest for a bit." Spottedpaw felt uncertainty rise when Fishstar gave her a meaningful look, but she listened and decided to return to her fellow apprentices.

"Hiya Spottedpaw!" Mosspaw chirped once again, her cheery tone erasing any sense of doubt. "We worked on more stances while you took care of your upset stomach!"

"My-" Spottedpaw broke off, remembering how she'd vanished to the medicine den without an explanation. "O-Oh, right. That. Yeah, I'm feeling better now-let me see the stances!"

"I call this one the Teetering Badger!" Mosspaw reared up onto one rear leg, teetering even more precariously than Mousepaw had earlier. Spottedpaw held back a burst of laughter when Mousepaw nudged his sister, causing her to topple over with a squeal of

surprise.

"That doesn't even *look* like a badger!" Mousepaw accused, though he was visibly holding back laughter as well.

"You don't even know what a badger looks like!" Mosspaw retorted, untangling her paws and getting back on her feet. "You've never seen one, have ya?"

"W-Well, no-"

"That's what I thought!" Mosspaw turned her nose up in mock contempt, while Mousepaw rolled his eyes. Spottedpaw watched the ordeal, struggling to hold back her own laughter.

"Well Hazelberry told me what they look like, and it definitely wasn't *that."* Mousepaw gave a huff. "Anyways, watch this Spottedpaw! I don't have a name for it yet, but I bet it'd be super intimidating to anyone we fight!" Spottedpaw tilted her head as Mousepaw flung himself forward, turning so that he wobbled around only on his front paws. His hindlegs dangled in the air, and he stumbled around, struggling to keep his balance.

"Oh, yeah, sure," Mosspaw teased him. "I'd be *so* scared of a wobbly ol' apprentice!" Immediately, Mousepaw rounded on her and rushed at her. Spottedpaw snickered as Mosspaw let out a squeak of surprise at his approach, and laughed even harder when the tom slipped and fell from his dorky-looking position. The siblings immediately joined her in uncontrollable laughter, their bellies quickly starting to hurt from the force of it. Spottedpaw put a paw over her stomach in an attempt to cease her pained laughter; when it finally bubbled down to a soft chuckle, she was grateful.

Spottedpaw glanced to the right and saw that Fishstar was striding toward the twisted stump in the middle of the camp. She twitched an ear when he leaped onto it and gave a yowl to call a Clan meeting. *Surely this isn't how he's going to choose which warriors to follow me at the half moon,* she thought warily as she and the other apprentices padded forward slowly.

"I know this may seem abrupt," Fishstar began speaking, his voice

ringing around the camp. "I spoke with the mentors of our current apprentices, and they've said that, though we haven't held end-of-training assessments as we normally do, their apprentices have earned their warrior names." When Mousepaw and Mosspaw exchanged shocked glances, Spottedpaw held back a purr of amusement. Though she hadn't seen them in battle, she knew that the siblings were as ready to become warriors as Smallmoon was when he received his warrior name-they deserved it, too.

"Congratulations," she whispered in Mousepaw's ear as they stepped forward carefully, feeling proud of her friends. The odd-eyed tom sent her a thankful glance, his tail quivering from excitement. Spottedpaw watched them from the back of the crowd, happiness welling up in her chest.

"I, Fishstar, leader of SwiftClan, call upon our warrior ancestors to look down upon these apprentices," Fishstar gave the two shaking apprentices a glance that was full of kindness and reassurance. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and to uphold it throughout their apprenticeships. I commend them to you as warriors in their turn. Mosspaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect your Clan, even if it costs you your life?"

"I do!" Mosspaw barely managed to get the words out, her eyes shimmering from her excitement.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Mosspaw, from this moment on you will be known as Mosspuddle. StarClan honors your compassion and spirit, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SwiftClan."

A few soft cheers resounded from the crowd that had gathered, though nobody chanted their names yet. Spottedpaw resisted the urge to cheer with her Clanmates, settling for watching her friends receive their warrior names proudly. Fishstar turned to Mousepaw, an expression of great consideration on his face.

"Mousepaw," he started, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Though his voice rang clearly, Spottedpaw could tell just how excited the odd-eyed tom was. Admittedly, this was the calmest she had ever seen him. She closed her eyes briefly and remembered how he fretted being called something horrendous like mouse-brain or mouse-heart, and ended up having to hold back a chuckle at the memory.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Mousepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Mouseberry. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and kindness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SwiftClan." Spottedpaw held back a snort at the virtues that Fishstar named-they were fitting of the grey tom. She prepared to cheer for the new warriors, stopping only when she locked eyes with Fishstar. By the sounds of it, most of the other warriors thought the same as she did, and their cheers were cut off by Fishstar's mew.

"Mosspudd-"

"Spottedpaw, step forward," Fishstar commanded, startling his apprentice and silencing the cheers. Spottedpaw swallowed her shock and stepped forward slowly. "Though you haven't been here long, you've already proven to me that you're willing to change and adapt to the ways of our Clan-for the safety of our Clan. I couldn't be prouder to have called you my apprentice, if only for a short time. Do you, Spottedpaw, promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect SwiftClan-*your* Clan-even at the cost of your life?" Spottedpaw found herself searching Fishstar's gaze for some kind of cue, and, when she found nothing but pride, struggled to respond.

"I- I do." The surety of her tone surprised Spottedpaw, but she knew that she meant it. She said it again, giving more force to her words this time and holding his gaze. "I do, Fishstar."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Spottedpaw, from this moment onward, you will be known as Spottedpath. StarClan honors your responsibility and self-discipline, and we welcome you as a full warrior of SwiftClan!"

"Mosspuddle! Mouseberry! Spottedpath!" The warriors of SwiftClan cheered their names, and Spottedpath felt her fur heat up from her

eartips to her tail. Whether it was embarrassment, happiness, pride, or a mixture of the three, she wasn't entirely certain. Not a single cat of SwiftClan rejected her, and for once, she finally felt like she had a home; she felt like she finally belonged somewhere, even if she'd lost a few friends along the way. As her Clanmates called out her new name, Spottedpath decided with a sense of resolve that she would do anything to protect them, and she would give *everything* to make sure her friends from the Gorge were just as safe as her newfound family in SwiftClan.

Chapter 24

Author's Note ;; Happy Friday guys! Please disregard the lack of indentations and proper em dashes. Wattpad has a habit of deleting them all when I publish works, and I've just now noticed it—I'm fixing it when I find the time! ♡

This chapter contains themes of violence that some might find disturbing. Continue with caution.

Spottedpath padded slowly across the moorland, the midnight breeze stinging her face and making her eyes water. While she walked, she wondered when the first snow would hit; truthfully, her wandering mind was just a way to mask her overwhelming anxiety over meeting her brother. Fishstar hadn't told her who he'd chosen to tail her to their meeting, or if he'd decided to be the one to do it. Spottedpath threw a glance over her shoulder, squinting in the darkness in an attempt to seek out any secretive shadows. To her dismay, the half moon didn't provide nearly enough light for that, and she was stuck wondering who could be watching over her—or if anyone was following her at all.

She found the southern border with the Gorge, wrinkling her nose at the now-foreign yet nostalgic scent of it. Peering into the forests on the opposite side of the border, she felt a distant sense of longing; more overwhelming than that, however, was a gnawing feeling of dread. Spottedpath wondered what Deadeye was currently doing in their cave, if he was further terrorizing the more emotional cats, if he was still forcing his own children to endure warrior training through their sickness.

When she finally reached the spot she'd told Nightpaw to send Riverdash to, there was no sign of the brown tabby. Spottedpath glanced around warily and, though she desperately tried to restrain herself, she paced anxiously back and forth in front of a tree she didn't realize she'd chosen. A few moments of subconscious pacing, a few glances to the steadily-rising half moon, and Spottedpath became worried. *Where are you, Riverdash?* she fretted anxiously,

pausing her pacing only to peer into darkness. *If I have to wait much longer, I'll just have to call it off—*

"Spottedpaw?" a wavering voice came from the darkness behind the trees, laced with uncertainty. The voice cut off Spottedpath's thoughts as she whipped her head to identify the source, though she already knew who it was. The scent of her brother, though it was a distant memory until now, washed over her, and Riverdash padded out of the shadows. His green eyes glittered with anticipation until they met hers, and then they lit up with recognition and relief.

"Riverdash!" Spottedpath breathed out, rushing to greet him at the border. "I-It's actually Spottedpath, now—I was granted my warrior name shortly after the Gathering." The young warrior was careful not to stray into Gorge territory, and Riverdash seemed to have the same idea, not letting a whisker cross the invisible border.

"What happened?" he questioned her warily. "Obviously you got away, but . . . Frostheart came back with more blood than a scratched nose would do." Her brother glanced at her shoulder hesitantly, inspecting the gross scar that served as a permanent memory of her escape—as if the death of her mentor wasn't burned permanently into her mind.

"Frostheart almost got me," Spottedpath mewed, glancing around. Briefly she wondered if she had the time to explain it, then decided that a quick explanation wouldn't hurt. "I barely managed to escape, and I ended up losing consciousness on BlazeClan territory. Heatherstar took me in and sheltered me—until the medicine cats requested that I move to another Clan. The leader said that he'd be willing to help us."

"Help us?" Riverdash echoed, though there was no confusion in his expression, nor his voice. He knew exactly what she meant.

"Yes," Spottedpath held his gaze, careful not to waver. "Riverdash, what if you helped sneak out anyone that doesn't want to be there? I-In the Gorge, I mean."

"Me?" Riverdash looked thoughtful, as if he were truly pondering over the idea. "I try to be as peaceful as possible, Spottedpath—you

know this. If I were to help with this plan of yours . . . ."

"I know, Riverdash," Spottedpath held back a sigh, struggling to keep her tone confident. "I know. I also know that it isn't safe there anymore; he let his own kit die, for StarClan's sake!" When Riverdash cringed at her words, Spottedpath fixed him with a quizzical look.

"Actually, Blackpaw died shortly after the Gathering," the tabby tom uttered reluctantly, as if he didn't even want to think about it. Spottedpath found it hard to stomach, and she hadn't even been there to witness it. *I'd be willing to bet that he called them weak for succumbing to the illness,* she thought darkly. *Poor Sunpaw. I hope she survives.*

"So, Deadeye has driven two of his sick children to death," Spottedpath concluded slowly. "Riverdash, you've got to know that that's not normal. It's not safe there, for *anyone."*

Riverdash didn't say anything in response. Instead, he glanced over his shoulder anxiously, as if he felt someone watching him. The action reminded Spottedpath of her own anxiety and mimicked him before fixing her gaze on him once again.

"Riv . . . ." she murmured softly, the natural-sounding yet brand new nickname catching her brother's attention. He gave her a somber gaze and sighed quietly.

"I'd love to help, Spottedpath," Riverdash whispered; the conflict in his eyes made it obvious he was fighting himself over the idea. "C'mon, though. This is extremely dangerous, and you know it." Spottedpath struggled to keep her frustration down; it was hard enough to ignore her anxiety alone. She *knew* he was right—it was an incredibly dangerous plan. Even meeting at the border like they were directly jeopardized their lives. Either way, innocent cats die. *That* was the part that frustrated her.

"So, you escape and get killed, or you do *nothing* and get killed anyways?" Spottedpath countered eventually, unable to keep the accusatory tone from her voice. She tore at the grass gently in an attempt to control her emotions; the soothing coolness of it against

the pads of her paws kept the negative emotions at bay. "Either way, there are unnecessary deaths. He needs to be stopped, and I refuse to go down—or let any of you go down—without a fight. I've sworn to do everything I can to make things right." Her words left Spottedpath full of an unprecedented amount of guilt. *Is it right for me to drag Riverdash into this, just because it's something* I *want?* she questioned herself as she struggled to ignore the guilt.

"I want to help—really, I do," Riverdash assured her quickly. Uncertainty flickered in his green gaze as he mentally weighed his options. "I'll . . . I'll talk to Nightpaw, okay? I'll see if we can't come up with a safer way to do this."

"Thank you, Riverdash," Spottedpath murmured gratefully. She wanted to reach across the border and pull her littermate into an embrace, but she knew she couldn't risk raising Deadeye's suspicion—or giving him a reason to attack SwiftClan. The two of them settled for brief bows before moving to return to their respective camps.

"Oh, I don't think so." A new voice chimed in, startling them. Dustleap stalked out from behind a tree. His amber eyes were dark and narrowed, flickering between his siblings. "Pearlpaw overheard Nightpaw's message to you and came running to tell me, just like the day when our dearest sister here got driven out. You should know by now that you can't have secrets in the Gorge." Shock coursed through Spottedpath's body right before anger settled in. Her previous anxiety and frustration were washed away from the anger that made it hard for her to ignore the borders that restricted her. *Pearlpaw is the reason everything fell apart? She betrayed her own sister, for what? Some satisfaction in seeing me suffer?* Spottedpath tore at the grass beneath her, unable to comprehend why Pearlpaw would do such a thing—twice, now—to her own sister. Then again, Deadeye always encouraged cats to keep an emotional distance, and perhaps this was why.

"Dustleap, come on," Riverdash barely found his voice as he backed away. "You don't have to be Deadeye's pawn like this—"

"Oh, really?" Dustleap sneered, rounding on their brother. Riverdash visibly flinched when he closed the distance between

them. "What could you possibly know, oh mighty peacekeeper? I'm sure *you* know a lot about being used as a pawn—what with Spottedpath here trying to convince you to help with her plans of treachery." Spottedpath couldn't help the threatening step that she took forward, and she wondered again where her backup was. *Perhaps they're waiting for an actual attack,* she mused, though she couldn't rid herself of the foreboding pit that formed in her stomach. She knew nothing good would come from this confrontation.

"Dustleap, I'm serious—"

"Deadeye is going to stabilize the forest, just you watch," Dustleap growled, ignoring Riverdash's pleas. "She's just poisoning your mind—StarClan is a tool to control the weak. If you were smart, you'd understand that. Deadeye always says that, and he's *always* right. The weak die, and the strong carry on." Spottedpath wondered what could have spurred his fixation on Deadeye, and swiftly decided that she didn't like the answer she came up with. As much as she hated the idea, she knew that her conclusion made more sense than it should.

The comment about StarClan struck an uncomfortable chord, and Spottedpath couldn't hold back her anger at his accusation as she protested, "No, Dustleap, they're real, trust me—"

"Shut up, Spottedpath." He spat it with such venom that Spottedpath instinctively flinched away from his words. "You're weak. That's why you mourned with Nightpaw and Ironheart when Brownpaw was shoved into the river; you're all so insufferably weak." Another wave of shock crashed into Spottedpath at full force when she registered just what he said. *Brownpaw was* pushed *off the cliff that day?* she thought incredulously. *He– He knew it was going to happen—he didn't want to leave the caves that day. It was more than just a fear he developed.* She'd had a gut feeling ever since the incident, considering how little Thornheart cared about losing her first apprentice. Despite this, the warrior was more furious than ever, and could no longer control herself. She stormed over the border and threw herself at Dustleap, who narrowly avoided her and tackled Riverdash instead. Spottedpath rounded on him again, hesitating when Dustleap pinned Riverdash and held his paw up.

"Riverdash!" Spottedpath cried, freezing in her spot when she saw Dustleap's claws at the ready. She told herself that he wouldn't dare, but she knew that, under the right circumstances, he would. The question remained as to what exactly the right circumstances were, though Spottedpath feared that they'd brought such circumstances upon themselves.

"One more step and he's dead," he threatened, fixing her with a burning glare. Spottedpath eyed him, considering her approach carefully. She knew if she moved or spoke too aggressively, Dustleap would likely kill Riverdash—but were they past that point already? Had he already made the decision, and insisted on toying with them for a bit longer?

"How could you, Dustleap?" Spottedpath formulated her words slowly this time as she tried to calculate the situation. "He's our brother! Our littermate! Just because Deadeye says you can't cherish your family, you threaten his life? Our *blood* doesn't have to mean nothing. We grew up together." She felt a flicker of hope when she saw a brief flash of hesitation in his eyes, though she didn't dare move. Perhaps she was on the right track with her words—a few more convincing words, and he'd surely reconsider his actions.

"No, Spottedpath, relationships make you weak," Dustleap curled his lip in what seemed like disgust. "That includes family. You became too attached to us, why? Because we're littermates? That's nonsense. You're weak, just like Nightpaw, and just like Riverdash."

"Dustleap, please, think this over," Riverdash urged, and Spottedpath could tell he was trying to keep his voice from trembling. His gaze flickered to Spottedpath briefly, the desperation in his eyes telling her everything she needed to know. He wanted her to let him handle it. "Don't let yourself be remembered for this. We're brothers, right? You don't have to do this. You *don't* have to be Deadeye, no matter what he says." Riverdash truly was the mediator of the litter—if anyone could calm Dustleap, Spottedpath knew it would be him. It would always be him. The words seem to strike a nerve, and, to Spottedpath's dismay, Dustleap flexed his claws threateningly.

"Deadeye has always treated me better than anyone," he snarled the words slowly, any hesitance gone from his stance. His amber eyes were fierce as he glowered at Riverdash. "He showed faith in me when everyone else ignored me—he promised me glory and recognition! Spottedpath got pampered by her weak mentor, and you spent all your time worrying about her! And don't even get me started on Fernspring—that bee-brain is so caught up with Shortstep, it's just sad at this point. But you two—you're both fox-hearted dissidents! You're traitors!" He lashed his paw out, his claws glinting in the faint moonlight as they cut through the air and towards their terrified littermate.

"No!" Spottedpath heart pounded in her chest and she leaped forward, but she was too late. Dustleap's claws made contact with Riverdash's throat; blood immediately spattered onto the ground, twinkling like droplets of morning dew and staining the blades of grass. She tackled Dustleap off of a bleeding Riverdash, bearing her claws and tearing at his fur as they tumbled against a tree. Dustleap quickly wriggled out from her grip and got a few blows in—searing pain in her ear confirmed the hits, and she knew it'd leave a scar. *No, no, no!* Spottedpath thought urgently as she tried to gain an advantage. *Fishstar, where are you?* She threw herself at her brother again, ignoring the feeling of satisfaction she got when she raked her claws along his shoulder. Dustleap visibly held back a snarl of pain—perhaps trying not to draw attention to the fight, though Spottedpath couldn't say why. She winced when his claw caught her cheek, and when heat pooled after the contact, she knew that blood was dripping from the wound.

Spottedpath could feel herself losing breath the longer she fought him; upon a hurried inspection, the heaving chest of her brother revealed that he was in no better shape. She narrowed her eyes, narrowly ducking under a blow that was aimed for her eyes. A hiss escaped when, instead of her eyes, his claws raked along her forehead. Blood blinded her temporarily and she grew panicked, lashing her claws out repeatedly and somehow making contact with Dustleap's skin. Sharp hisses from him told her that they'd been solid blows.

She blinked the blood from her eyes and saw her chance—

Dustleap had hesitated, presumably when he saw her vision hindered by blood, and glanced over to Riverdash. Rage fueling her energy, Spottedpath launched herself forward and tackled Dustleap to the forest floor. She pinned him with her claws to his throat, drawing only the tiniest bit of blood. Pure fear replaced the ambition that normally rested in his eyes, and memories of her first confrontation with Deadeye invaded her mind, along with the few pleasant memories she'd had with her brother. She thought of the scars Deadeye had left on her—mentally as well as physically, and tried not to grimace at the thought. She didn't want to put her brother through the same ordeal, though she had a feeling he'd already experienced the same.

Spottedpath sheathed her claws and, after a heartbeat, got off of her brother. "You'd better watch out, Dustleap. Next time I see you, I won't let you leave alive."

"You truly are weak, Spottedpath," Dustleap coughed out as he scrambled to his paws. His gaze hardened, though a hint of fear still lingered. "You couldn't even kill me for attacking our brother." There was a flash of something in his expression—perhaps it was regret—when he let his gaze flicker to Riverdash before turning and fleeing into the forest. A weak cough from the brown tabby made Spottedpath realize he was still barely alive, and she rushed to his side. Blood had already pooled around him, and when she neared, it soaked into her paws and between her claws. She hardly even noticed it—her brother bleeding out had more of her attention.

"No, no, no, Riverdash, I'm so sorry," she croaked urgently and tried to apply pressure to the seeping wound on his throat. She was no medicine cat, and frankly, it was the only thing she could think to do. "T-This wasn't supposed to happen. Oh, StarClan, I'm sorry." Riverdash's labored breathing and wide, frightened eyes caused her stomach to lurch painfully. She knew what was to come soon, and by the look in Riverdash's eyes, he knew, as well. Even so, she desperately tried to stop his bleeding and prayed that backup would come soon.

"Spottedpath, it's okay," he wheezed, coughing up blood. "I had a feeling something like this would happen. Just . . . stop them for me. You won't be able to save everyone, you know, but—" He

sputtered again, blood spattering onto Spottedpath's chest. She barely even noticed, too concerned about stopping his gushing wound to care about her stained fur.

"Riv, stop talking," Spottedpath pleaded desperately, her ears starting to ring painfully. "J-Just hush, please. You're not going anywhere, okay?" She swallowed the lump in her throat and struggled to hold back sobs when Riverdash ignored her pleas. Now that she'd been distracted from the battle, blood from the cut above her eyes was blinding again; even so, she barely noticed the stinging pain of her wounds, nor did she care about the blood that hindered her sight.

He gave her a reassuring blink and took another wheezing breath before speaking again. "—you can stop Deadeye and Dustleap. You were always special—I know you can change things. Keep your chin up, little sister," he rasped, almost choking on the blood at this point. By now, Spottedpath's ears were roaring, and the edges of her vision darkened and blurred as she focused only on Riverdash. When she spoke, she could barely hear her own voice—it was muffled in her ears, as if she were underwater.

"N-No, no, this isn't right. Riverdash, come on, I'm here—stay awake with me, okay? I– I can send for help, you just need to hang on!" Spottedpath felt her desperation rise as he stopped talking and grew still. Muttering frantically to herself, she continued trying to stop the bleeding in an attempt to save him. Deep inside her mind, she knew it was too late—she'd become accustomed to what death looked like, after seeing Hawkscar, Jaggedthorn, Heatherstorm, and Grassheart die, but she still tried to save her now-lifeless brother. The sound of thundering paws and racing claws kicking up grass didn't register in her brain, nor did she hear Fishstar as the leader appeared at the border, his chest heaving from his sprint to find her. Spottedpath barely acknowledged him as his eyes fell on the scene before him.

"Spottedpath, I'm sorry I'm late—Oh, great StarClan," he finally whispered, his voice growing distraught at the sight when he finally registered it. "W-What happened here?" Spottedpath felt fury mix with her grief and she rounded on the tabby leader.

"My brother happened," she cursed with a faltering tone, no longer able to control her emotions. "He followed Riverdash here, and you— you—" Spottedpath cut herself off when she couldn't finish the sentence, finding herself incapable of meeting Fishstar's horrified gaze. *You were supposed to be here,* she thought furiously, feeling betrayed by the leader. *Why weren't you here?* It took everything inside of her to not accuse the leader outright, and she shut her eyes briefly to restrain herself. After a moment of anger, tearing aggressively at the grass beneath her paws, she narrowed her eyes and took in a slow, decisive breath.

"Deadeye has finally chosen his heir, and I think I know who it is."

Chapter 25

The days after Riverdash's death seemed to blur together; it was much like how Spottedpath felt after Hawkscar's death, though this time she wasn't confined to a medicine den or sedated like poppy seeds. She'd lost track of time, the only indicator of days passing was the steadily-decreasing temperatures and bitter winds. Few cats paid much attention to the dazed warrior, though every so often, someone would come to ask if she was okay. The words usually fell on deaf ears, however, and left Spottedpath more confused than before. She hadn't even noticed when Mouseberry had approached her, the odd-eyed tom's face riddled with worry.

His mouth moved as though he were speaking, but no words registered to Spottedpath. She blinked and tried to discard the blank expression she knew she had, but it was no use. Luckily, Mouseberry didn't seem offended with how his words only went through her—if anything, he seemed more worried.

"Spottedpath, are you okay?" His words were muffled at first, and Spottedpath wondered if she had water in her ears. However, she heard well enough to manage a response this time, and had to hold back a relieved sigh.

"Oh, yes. I'm fine, thank you," Spottedpath responded, her voice no more than a distant whisper. She told herself her behavior was stupid—she'd dealt with loss before, so she couldn't grasp why it was hitting her so hard this time. *Maybe there's something wrong with me,* she thought guiltily when Mouseberry hid a concerned glance. *I almost yelled at Fishstar after he took the time to help me bury Riverdash.* Spottedpath told herself to get a grip as she recalled the memory, her eyes glazing over when her mind drifted there.

Spottedpath padded in the direction of the camp behind her leader. They'd buried Riverdash outside the Gathering clearing—it was Spottedpath's choice, she thought it would help him find his way to StarClan. Her paws were still covered in blood, though it was now sticky

and uncomfortably noticeable. When she looked around, her sight blurred together, and she was suddenly unsure if they were even returning to camp—she was only following Fishstar.

"There's a small stream nearby," Fishstar's hesitant mew brought her back to reality. "You can clean your fur there, and I'll wait for you here." Spottedpath only blinked, feeling too numb to process the words he spoke. Her gaze flickered to him slowly and she found herself choking on words she didn't remember speaking.

"Where were you?"

"What?" Fishstar countered quickly, though she could see guilt plainly in his eyes.

"You heard me." Spottedpath could hear her voice wavering and cracking as she spoke. Her gaze darted away from Fishstar briefly—scanning the distant hills distrustfully—before landing back on his face.

"I got caught up with something important." Even though his tone was flat, Spottedpath could see that he was considering each word carefully. She noted that he wasn't careful enough when she found herself biting back a sharp rebuke; he must have seen it in her eyes, because he stepped forward and spoke again, "Spottedpath, things happen—" That was her breaking point.

"My brother is dead because you weren't there like you said you'd be, and all you have to say for yourself is that things happen? Seriously?" Her voice was wry as she felt anger bubble up inside her again. Fishstar only stared at her, seemingly unable to find an appropriate response.

"Spottedpath? Hello?" Spottedpath blinked when Mouseberry waved his paw in front of her face to get her attention. "Where'd you go just now?" She winced when she finally realized how concerned her usually carefree friend looked.

"I was just thinking," she murmured absent-mindedly, inwardly cringing at her own stale words. Mouseberry fixed her with a disbelieving stare before he shifted his gaze to Mosspuddle. Spottedpath watched him, noticing how his expression turned from

thoughtful to something darker; she knew he was considering losing his own sibling, and he'd realized he couldn't stand the idea.

"If you ever need to talk about anything—anything at all—I'm here," the grey tom reminded her gently. Spottedpath offered a quiet, grateful murmur, and pretended not to notice when Mouseberry stared at her for a moment too long before leaving.

Once she was alone again, Spottedpath allowed herself to drift back into her thoughts. Briefly, she thought of Nightpaw, and realized that she needed to get her friend out of the Gorge. The warrior knew now that Pearlpaw had been the one to get her exiled, and that she'd told Dustleap about her meeting with Riverdash on the border. Would he return to the Gorge and tell Deadeye what happened? Spottedpath couldn't imagine that Pearlpaw actually wanted to endanger her own sister like that—she didn't *want* to imagine it.

Spottedpath grew nauseated when she thought of Nightpaw's potential fate—it was a fate *she* sealed when she asked her friend to speak to Riverdash. She'd endangered the lives of so many for a poorly-structured idea she'd had. *I'd be better off charging right to Deadeye to challenge him,* she thought bitterly. Spottedpath realized her breathing had become ragged and her lungs felt smaller in her chest; soon, each breath became labored and painful. She grew hot and clammy despite the biting winds of leaf-fall, and quickly found herself wishing she could simply vanish into the walls of the camp.

"How are you holding up?" Muddapple's presence startled Spottedpath, and she gave the hesitant medicine cat a dazed look.

"What?" she murmured softly, rooting herself to the present moment. Muddapple stared at her, as if searching her expression for a hint of what she was thinking.

"You seem a bit overwhelmed," he commented softly, his golden eyes softening. Spottedpath only stared at him, struggling to comprehend her own thoughts.

"My brother just died," she responded flatly. She felt bad when Muddapple looked lost at her response, but she couldn't muster up

any other words. What did he expect her to say, that she was doing fine? She knew better than to lie to a medicine cat by now.

"Y-Yeah, er— I'm sorry, I'm just trying to—" Spottedpath cut him off, not ready to hear another of his lectures about the prophecy or her duty.

"Keep nudging me along to do your dirty work? I know. I've made my decision, you don't have to keep up the act."

Muddapple blinked in confusion. "No, Spottedpath, that's not—"

"I don't care anymore, Muddapple. I'm going to make Deadeye pay for what he's done to the forest."

"Spottedpath . . . ." Muddapple gave her a serious look, gaining his composure quickly when he saw the fierce look in her eyes. "I know that you're hurt, but you shouldn't be doing this out of revenge. It won't end well."

"I'm not doing this for revenge," Spottedpath muttered quickly, though she avoided his gaze. The medicine cat saw right through her, his honey-golden eyes staring right into her soul as they always had.

"Just . . . remember that you always have someone to talk to here. And I don't mean about prophecies," he added quickly, giving her a look. "If you have another dream and want to talk, take your time. You deserve time to process everything that's happened— you've dealt with more loss than any young warrior should have to." For some reason, his words reminded Spottedpath of her dream at Starfalls, and Shadestar's warning. She made a sudden, silent decision, and rose to her paws.

"I-I'm sorry. I have something I think I need to do." Spottedpath turned abruptly and headed to the warriors den just to stop outside of it. She could feel Muddapple watching her, and an idea clicked inside her mind. "Actually . . . ."

"Are you okay?" Muddapple queried gently when she turned back to him, the gears turning in her head visible by the expression

on her face.

"Muddapple, could you . . . maybe help me with something?" Spottedpath finally spoke sheepishly after a few moments. She felt bad for acting so coldly toward him—he had nothing to do with the deaths she'd witnessed, he was only a medicine cat. Besides, she truly could use his help.

"Of course," he murmured in response; his golden eyes, though confused, were pools of warmth that invited Spottedpath in. The golden-furred warrior padded up to him slowly, tossing around an idea in her head.

"Is it possible to . . . deliberately visit StarClan?" she formulated her words slowly, trying not to imply something terrible—judging by Muddapple's horrified expression, she had done exactly that. "I didn't mean like that! I– I meant, you know, in your dreams. I've never deliberately had, well, dreams, they've always . . . come to me, I guess."

Muddapple composed himself quickly, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes where horror previously rested. "As one does," he mumbled to her, then added, "One does not usually *seek out* visits to their ancestors—I'm sure it's possible though. Why do you ask?"

"I need to speak to Shadestar," Spottedpath held his gaze, feeling more determined than ever. Her sheer amount of determination was not, however, enough to hide the anger that still lingered inside of her.

"Spottedpath," Muddapple mewed, his tone cautionary, "it isn't wise to lash out—"

"Can I do it or not, Muddapple?" she interrupted, not letting go of his gaze.

"Well, yeah," Muddapple responded slowly. "Yeah, you can. Normally, you'd want to visit Starfalls, *however—"* He held up his tail when Spottedpath opened her mouth to speak "—it's too soon for Brightpelt and I to afford another visit, and you shouldn't be traveling there in your condition." Spottedpath felt herself deflate at

his words—she knew he wouldn't let her leave on her own, and she let her frustration show.

"What am I supposed to do, then? Wait around?" she snapped, rolling her eyes. Muddapple looked thoughtful for a moment, then spoke again.

"Resting in the medicine den might make it easier," he mumbled before leading her into the den. Brightpelt watched them enter from where she sorted their collections of herbs, though she didn't utter a word to them. Muddapple pointed Spottedpath toward a makeshift moss nest—she assumed it was for patients that needed to be monitored—and she promptly nestled into it. When she closed her eyes, she focused on the shuffling of the medicine cats as they moved about; she tried not to think of how they must be silently motioning to one another, and let the noises pull her into a deep sleep.

When she opened her eyes, Spottedpath found herself in a painfully familiar cave. She scoffed lightly to herself and looked around slowly. *Of course this is where he'd be,* she thought to herself and closed her eyes. In the time since she'd started receiving her dreams, she'd become better at distinguishing the ever-so-faint scents of the ancestors from the star-laced scent of, well, everything else. Underneath the damp scent of the cave, she detected a more familiar one and followed it out of the cave and onto the cliff's edge.

Once she overlooked the river in the gorge, she noticed Shadestar settled safely up on the ridge. His misty blue eyes gazed wistfully over the cliff, a deep longing evident on his face. Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and silently shuffled over to him. She noted how his pelt seemed to be more star-dappled than before, though she didn't feel the need to question it.

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Shadestar's calm mew pulled her attention to what he was staring at. Spottedpath followed his gaze over the river and noticed the purplish tint in the sky, mixed with enthralling shades of orange. She'd never seen the sky look so beautiful by her home. *Spottedpath, snap yourself out of it,* she told herself when she realized she'd become distracted.

"Don't try to distract me," she spoke curtly. "You know why I'm here."

"Do I?" Shadestar let his hazy blue gaze flicker over to her momentarily before returning to the entrancing colors before him. "Do *you* know why you're here?" Spottedpath blinked, growing angry at the distance in his tone.

"Yes!" she burst out, amazed at him. "I'm the one that came to *you* this time, of course I know why I'm here! My brother is dead—that's another death that's on me."

Shadestar was silent at first, and Spottedpath inspected him. When she fell silent alongside him, he let out a hum of acknowledgement—the sound only spiked her anger with him once again, and she narrowed her eyes. She knew that he was likely egging her on with his deliberate silence, but she didn't care.

"You don't have anything to say? Did you know this would happen?" Spottedpath snapped, resisting the urge to get closer. When he said nothing, she widened her eyes. "I could have prevented it, couldn't I? Riverdash didn't have to die like that?"

"I sent you messages." The sentence alone would have been enough to push her over the edge, but the sheer apathy of his voice made her absolutely seethe.

"You think that was enough? I'm not some medicine cat. I don't understand whatever obscure dreams you shove my way at night." Spottedpath gave in and rounded on him, furious that he'd known and only bothered sending her unintelligible signs.

"It was the only option."

"Don't lie," Spottedpath snarled at him, and she grew angry when his posture hardly changed.

"I would never." The shade-furred tom turned to her this time, holding her gaze with his smokey eyes. Spottedpath flexed her claws, struggling to keep her emotions down.

"Your trivial theories and prophecies won't bring peace to the

Clans, Shadestar," she growled, her voice low and loaded with emotion. The warrior watched him closely, noticing how his demeanor changed only slightly; it was as if he were suddenly pretending not to be interested in her words. "All you've done is warn me of death and tell me to fix the mess you've made. If that's all you have to tell me about, I don't want to hear it anymore. I'll find peace on my own—without wasting my time trying to decipher your poorly-made dreams." Spottedpath turned and stormed off before Shadestar could respond, but not before she noticed the pride that had snuck its way into his stance.

She stormed away from the cliff's edge, cursing to herself as she padded through now-unfamiliar territory. *Of course it's unfamiliar, it's StarClan, not the forest,* she told herself in exasperation. Deep down, she found herself hoping she'd bump into Hawkscar. She was certain her mentor had made it—he must have. If Brownpaw made it to StarClan, Hawkscar had to have, and Riverdash should be there too. She glanced around the forest as she walked, wondering why it was so empty; surely she'd find someone that could point her to them.

As she became lost in her own mind, Spottedpath slowed to a much calmer pace, her anger ebbing away with each step. She stopped paying attention to her surroundings, and didn't notice when a large, creamy-white cat appeared in front of her—that is, until she walked face-first into them. The warm scent of the cat overwhelmed her and Spottedpath scrambled backwards, looking up to identify them. Her hopes were squashed when she saw who it was.

"Looking for someone else?" Ivorystar mewed softly, her voice soothing and reassuring. Spottedpath glanced her over and let out a soft sigh.

"Y-Yeah, kind of," she admitted quietly, looking down at her paws in embarrassment.

"He'll reveal himself when you're ready to see him again, Spottedpath. Don't worry," she comforted the smaller she-cat, her eyes kind. "And pay no mind to Shadestar's mentions of him. He's just trying to . . . provide incentive."

"Some incentive," Spottedpath muttered quietly, letting out a huff of frustration. Ivorystar gave a beautiful yet subtle laugh, her thick fur moving with her laughter.

"Well, when you're disconnected from your Clan for as long as he's been, you get desperate." Ivorystar hesitated, as if calculating Spottedpath's reactions. "I know that all of this is unfair to you. If we were given other choices, I promise, we'd have taken them." Spottedpath watched her closely and, when she decided that the leader was sincere, considered her words.

"So what, then?" she finally asked, eyeing Ivorystar. "I keep getting stupid, vague dreams based on, what, Shadestar's speculations?"

"Like I said, ignore him," once again, Ivorystar's laughter rang through the air, calming Spottedpath's mind. Then, she looked thoughtful. "You know, you remind me a lot of myself when I was younger. And a bit of Fishstar, when he was still Fishtail."

"What do you mean?" Spottedpath blinked in confusion. She couldn't see how she resembled Fishstar at all.

"You're so kind, sweet one," Ivorystar purred affectionately at her confusion. "Ready to help anyone who might need it, yet always willing to challenge what doesn't make sense. Just like your little declaration to Shadestar earlier." Her words were meaningful, and her eyes were kind. Spottedpath searched her expression—she didn't want to be rude, but she had a feeling there was another reason that Ivorystar was speaking to her. When she couldn't make sense of it in her head, she decided to speak up.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but is there a reason I'm seeing you?" Spottedpath murmured. The solemn look that appeared on Ivorystar's face confirmed her thoughts—the warrior only hoped that the dead SwiftClan leader made more sense than Shadestar.

"Just as he was a menace during my time as leader, Crowstar threatens the forest—pulling strings behind the scenes, much like we have been with you," Ivorystar mewed softly, keeping her gaze locked to Spottedpath. "There isn't much advice I can offer you,

Spottedpath; you must know that despite the losses so far, this war has only just begun. Never forget that it's because of you that hope has been born." She leaned forward, touching her muzzle to Spottedpath's forehead. The golden-furred warrior closed her eyes and breathed in the soothing scent that came from the StarClan leader.

A few moments later, the scent vanished along with the feeling of Ivorystar's muzzle resting on her head. Spottedpath stayed still and kept her eyes closed when she picked up on some whispers—she identified Brackenclaw, Muddapple, and Brightpelt and realized she was awake in the medicine den.

"We have to be careful. He's on his last two lives." That was Brightpelt, her voice laced with concern.

"What if Deadeye attacks?" Brackenclaw spoke up, though there was something in his voice that made Spottedpath's skin crawl. She didn't have time to ponder about it as Brightpelt spoke again.

"Brackenclaw, we're medicine cats. We can't tell you where to go from here, we can only tell you to be wary."

Before she could let herself grow guilty from eavesdropping, Spottedpath opened her eyes and slowly sat up, drawing attention to her. The medicine cats—and their guest—turned their gazes to her. Spottedpath held each of their stares but said nothing, well aware of the awkward silence that had fallen over the den.

"Spottedpath, are you okay?" Brackenclaw was the first to break the silence, though there was some deliberation to his words.

"Er . . . yes? I was just resting for a, uh, bellyache. Yep." Spottedpath mentally shamed herself when she stuttered and fumbled over her words. Something about Brackenclaw seemed off to her, and she glanced at Muddapple, hoping he'd step in and take over. "I must have eaten a rotten mouse, but, um . . . ."

Muddapple took the hint quickly and stepped forward, saving Spottedpath from her awkward stutterings. "Well, it was nice speaking with you, Brackenclaw," he murmured, urging the deputy

to leave.

"Pardon me?" Brackenclaw gave him a suspicious glance, and Spottedpath cringed inwardly. *So much for not drawing attention,* she thought, mentally grimacing. Muddapple certainly had a way with words when he wanted to, but now was not one of those times.

"We have to treat Spottedpath, it could be the beginnings of an illness." *Oh, Brightpelt, you wonderful, smart cat,* Spottedpath thought gratefully when the elder medicine cat saved both of them from their verbal fumbles. "Go on, now." Despite his protests, the white she-cat ushered Brackenclaw out of the den and quickly returned to Spottedpath alongside Muddapple.

"So, what happened?" Muddapple asked before Brightpelt could question them. The elder she-cat settled for giving them both withering looks, and though they knew she didn't mean it, Spottedpath knew she'd have to explain herself after this.

"Well, I– I've already told Fishstar, but my brother, Dustleap, is Deadeye's heir. I'm certain of it." They exchange a glance, though neither seemed surprised. Spottedpath let her gaze flicker between them, trying to decipher their thoughts.

"Given the circumstances, I kind of expected this," Brightpelt murmured softly, and Spottedpath chose to ignore the comment.

"What about the third cat in your visions, then?" Muddapple queried. His golden eyes swam with billions of questions, and Spottedpath found herself shrinking away from the thought. She hated being interrogated, and Muddapple always had a way of making her feel like he was doing just that.

"Call me crazy," she started, "but I think it might be Crowstar. I know he's dead, but he– he's got a grudge. A nasty one. Ivorystar warned me about him, and she said that the war has only just begun."

Muddapple and Brightpelt immediately exchanged grim glances. Spottedpath inspected them closely, and quickly harbored the idea that they knew something she didn't. *Of course they do,* she

reminded herself. *They're the ones who demanded I move to SwiftClan —they've got good reason, they just don't want to tell me. At least, not yet they don't.*

"We must tell Fishstar," Brightpelt concluded after a seemingly silent conversation with her apprentice. "Deadeye could be planning an—"

An ear-splitting screech erupted from the clearing, cutting off their conversation. The three cats exchanged panicked glances and rushed out of the medicine den, gasping when they saw a select few of Deadeye's warriors in the camp. Spottedpath shrunk back behind the medicine cats in an attempt to hide herself while she identified the cats that had arrived. *Snowface, Ironheart, Rocksplash, Fireclaw, Thornheart, Redflight, Clawtail,* she listed their names off mentally as she scanned them, noticing that she saw none of their apprentices, *and Dustleap and Frostheart. Oh, StarClan, they're not all here.*

"Muddapple," she hissed quietly as she tried to avoid catching the Gorge warriors' gazes. "That's not all of Deadeye's warriors, what if he—"

"I know," he muttered in response, his eyes not once leaving the invading warriors. "That was a risk Heatherstar knew she was taking, Spottedpath. We knew it, too." Muddapple looked like he was going to keep speaking when Fishstar appeared on top of the tree stump, a threatening glare raking over the clearing.

"What are you doing in our camp?" he demanded, his voice ringing in the air. Spottedpath glanced around and saw that almost all of her Clanmates had appeared, claws and teeth bared and at the ready. She flinched when Frostheart stalked forward gracefully, his gaze twinkling in amusement.

"We think you've got something of ours, Fishstar," he purred in a melodic tone. "And Deadeye would like it back." Fishstar bristled defensively while Brightpelt and Muddapple shifted to hide Spottedpath better. The golden warrior knew it was no use—her brother had reported back to Deadeye, and this was their next move.

"And what might that be?" Brackenclaw spoke up from his position below Fishstar, his green eyes unwavering and his voice holding a hint of challenge to it.

Frostheart gave a nearly inaudible snort of amusement before his gaze drifted lazily around the clearing. Spottedpath felt her breath hitch when he stopped at the medicine cats; he knew she was there. It was as if he didn't even see the medicine cats—only his target. He narrowed his eyes with what looked like some kind of sick glee, and he curled his lip back as he spoke.

"Her."

Chapter 26

Author's Note: I seriously...cannot figure out why Wattpad is deleting all of my indentations and em dashes—I've even double checked my postings on the browser, and they show up just fine until they...aren't.

Regardless, I hope you guys enjoy. ♡
-eve

"Her."

A silence seemed to fall over the clearing in the moments after Frostheart singled out Spottedpath. The tension was palpable, crackling in the air and setting every cat's fur on end. The cats of SwiftClan watched the Gorge invaders with bated breath, waiting for someone to make the first move. Spottedpath dared a glance toward Fishstar, who had barely moved from the stump.

"Spottedpath is a warrior of SwiftClan, Frostheart," he mewed slowly, his voice level as he studied the grey tom before him. Then, he turned to Clawtail, who stood behind Frostheart with Snowface. "Clawtail, it isn't too late to turn back. There's no need to cause such suffering here."

"That's enough," Frostheart growled before the regent could speak, though his eyes never left the golden tabby he'd called out. Spottedpath swallowed thickly and held his accusing gaze. *He's acting like he has more power than Clawtail, but something seems off,* she realized, feeling a pit of uncertainty form in her belly. It was the same feeling she'd got when Deadeye held an apprentice ceremony for his children only moments after finding out they had caught whitecough—and now two of those apprentices were dead.

"Frostheart," Fishstar called to him, and Spottedpath noticed a flicker in his gaze that mirrored how she felt, "Surely all of this isn't out of your loyalty for Deadeye. Back down now, and I promise, we'll let you leave peacefully." Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and

glanced around the clearing in an attempt to calculate their odds. Hollyheart, beneath the mangled stump that Fishstar perched on, still sported a wound from the ambush that killed Grassheart. Several other warriors in the crowd were in a similar disadvantage. Spottedpath knew that Deadeye trained his warriors to kill, not to defend, and even if the SwiftClan warriors had better numbers, there was a slim chance of them fending off the Gorge trespassers.

"He said that's enough," Snowface growled at Fishstar, the end of his sentence turning into a snarl as he threw himself at the leader. At once, the central clearing of the camp broke out into a flurry of flashing claws and hissing cats.

"Spottedpath, with us," Muddapple hissed into Spottedpath's ear before nudging her in the direction of the medicine den. Before the warrior could voice her objection, Frostheart gave a sneer from behind them.

"I don't think so," he growled, narrowing his eyes when the trio turned back to him. "I'm sure you already know this, but I'm not against killing a medicine cat or two to get to her."

Wordlessly, Brightpelt moved to stand protectively in front of Spottedpath, while Muddapple stayed tensely rooted on her other side. Spottedpath glanced between them in disbelief, starting forward when Frostheart took a threatening step forward.

"Let me handle this," she urged them, giving Brightpelt a soft nudge. "I have to do this. Go, keep yourselves safe."

"Spottedpath, if you die—" Brightpelt's turquoise gaze rested on her, and she gave a visible shudder at the thought.

"I've got no plans to die, Brightpelt," Spottedpath reassured her, feeling her anxiety heighten when Frostheart moved in her peripheral vision. Muddapple brushed against Spottedpath in an attempt to encourage her before leading Brightpelt away from the fighting.

"How noble of you," Frostheart called to her, taking on a sickeningly sarcastic tone. "I'll get you for what you did to me,

Spottedpath."

The dappled golden warrior turned to him, holding his intimidating glare. "For that little scar on your nose?" she taunted him daringly, keeping her paws rooted to the earth beneath her. "I never saw you as one to worry about appearances, Frostheart."

Without another word, Frostheart lunged at Spottedpath, who narrowly slid around the attack. She kept her sights locked on him, knowing better than to give him a chance to surprise her—Spottedpath had nearly lost her life to him once, and she wasn't about to let it happen again. With every attack and every dodge, the pair grew more desperate; what started out a smooth-flowing dance quickly turned into a wild flurry of claws and teeth.

Spottedpath hissed when Frostheart landed a blow on her ear, dangerously close to the nick that Dustleap left in it. She quickly leaped backwards to gain some distance from her opponent, fixing him with an unwavering gaze.

"You can't catch me off guard," Spottedpath declared, holding his furious glare. "Don't forget that Hawkscar trained me just as diligently as any other Gorge warrior."

"That scar on your shoulder might beg to differ," Frostheart retorted, his lip curling with the hint of a smirk. With another snarl, he tackled Spottedpath, and the two of them tumbled across the clearing in a fit of rage. Spottedpath willed up all the strength she could find and gripped Frostheart's fur with her claws, shoving him toward what her senses told her was the ground. When she was met with a steadying thump, she realized that she'd successfully pinned Frostheart down. He glared up at her with a defiant and taunting expression, as if he knew she couldn't end the fight the only way he would accept it.

When Spottedpath hesitated with her claws against Frostheart's throat, he shoved himself upwards and, before the younger warrior could react, dug his teeth into the loose skin of her scruff. With a mighty heave, he spun and flung Spottedpath against the walls of the camp, knocking the wind out of her. Spottedpath gasped, the feeling of her lungs shriveling up from the impact igniting a fresh

wave of panic and adrenaline. The entire time, she'd kept her sights locked on the now-approaching Frostheart, not yet ready to be bested by him. Spottedpath felt her resolve crumble when she failed to regain her breath, fearing he would get to her before she could recover.

Just as Frostheart towered over her, one paw raised and ready to strike her down for good, a flash of grey fur barreled into his side. Spottedpath blinked in surprise, staggering to her paws and turning to her savior. She prepared to thank Mouseberry for the timely entry, only to freeze when she saw that Fernwillow had come to her rescue instead of their odd-eyed Clanmate.

Birchtail followed the molly closely, her chest heaving and blood dripping from a few stray scratches. "Catch your breath, Spottedpath," the golden tabby barked, facing Frostheart with Fernwillow. Spottedpath took a few deep gasps to steady her breathing, realizing for the first time that day how her breath floated through the air in puffs of misty fog. She hadn't realized just how cold it had become with the passing of time; the air nipped at her cheeks and paws, threatening her with the snow that was sure to arrive shortly.

She didn't have time to ponder over her realization as movement in her peripheral vision called for her attention. Spottedpath glanced to the shaded movement and discovered it was none other than Dustleap, creeping into the nursery. Immediately a sense of dread swelled in her chest, and she stepped forward to speak to Birchtail.

"Can you two hold him off? I spotted movement by the nursery," Spottedpath hissed under her breath, her eyes not daring to look away from what was supposed to be a safe space for the kits.

"Oh, StarClan," Birchtail muttered, her gaze flicking to the nursery for half a heartbeat. "Go, check on the kits—I can handle this with Fernwillow." Spottedpath gave a nod in thanks and pelted to the nursery, dreading the idea of what she might find inside. *What could they want with the kits?* she asked herself, her mind racing to find an answer. She shoved her way into the nursery, her heart dropping at the familiar voices she heard from inside.

"What are you doing?" she gasped when she saw Pearlpaw and Dustleap cornering Juniperstorm and her kits at the back of the den. The pale tabby she-cat, now almost as long-legged as Nightpaw and Spottedpath herself, gave a blood-chilling laugh.

"What does it look like?" she sneered without sparing Spottedpath a glance. "We need more apprentices considering we've lost . . . how many, now, Dustleap? Three? Perfect amount for replacement here." Spottedpath felt her stomach lurch when Pearlpaw reached towards the kits that cowered behind Juniperstorm.

The grey tabby queen lashed out at the apprentice furiously, but it was as if Pearlpaw didn't even feel her claws; she simply kept reaching until she caught hold of one of them, sliding them toward herself. Juniperstorm gave a horrified gasp and reached for her kit, shuffling the other two out of sight behind her. Spottedpath gave a threatening growl and stepped forward, at which point Dustleap turned to her with the hint of a smirk dancing on his expression.

"One more step and I kill one of them," he warned her without a moment of hesitation. Spottedpath swallowed back her feelings of disgust toward him, becoming frozen to her spot as her gaze darted between the two invaders.

"What is wrong with you?" she breathed out, eyeing her brother carefully. The Dustleap she knew before she'd been driven out would never have threatened kits—then again, he wouldn't have killed their own brother, either. As frustrating as Dustleap had made Spottedpath's early apprenticeship, she preferred his behavior then to the villain he'd so readily turned into.

"I know how to get what I want," Dustleap purred, not offended by the question in the slightest. "Deadeye *will* rule this forest, Spottedpath. I'll make sure of it."

"You're insane," Spottedpath found herself whispering, though she no longer felt disbelief at his words. Instead there was a deep-rooted feeling of disappointment, and deeper than that, a trace of anticipation.

"No, he's smart, unlike you," Pearlpaw chimed in, her voice unnervingly cheerful considering her actions. "You know, you'll never sway my sister to be like you. She's going to become strong, just like we are." With that, she and Dustleap moved closer to Juniperstorm—while Dustleap towered threateningly over the queen, Pearlpaw reached for another kit. Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and watched them, desperately trying to calculate her chances of saving both the kits and their mother. After a few moments she moved to take a step toward them, but Juniperstorm's pleading voice interrupted her.

"L-Let them take the kits, Spottedpath," she begged as Dustleap shoved her away from the final kit, Aspenkit. The silver-and-white kit cowered away from Pearlpaw while Juniperstorm watched helplessly. "At least they'll live."

"Juniperstorm," Spottedpath started slowly, "Deadeye forced his own children to train after being diagnosed with whitecough. Only one of them is still alive." Juniperstorm's pleading expression turned into one of horror as she fixed her gaze on her own kits.

"They were weak," Dustleap growled, rounding on Spottedpath once Pearlpaw had begun to lead the kits out of a hole in the rear wall of the nursery. "Just like you are. These kits will grow to be strong warriors under Deadeye's command." Spottedpath hesitated as she and Juniperstorm helplessly watched the kits get taken away. *I need to do something without risking their lives,* she told herself, her gaze flicking wildly around the den in an attempt to think of something. After a moment of consideration, Spottedpath took a step forward; Dustleap mimicked her, his gaze boring into her own.

"Let them go, Spottedpath," Juniperstorm whispered sadly as she watched her kits leave. "They won't get far if we get help."

"Let's hurry, then," Spottedpath muttered with a final glare at Dustleap. She hesitated before turning to leave the den, with Juniperstorm close behind her. The golden-furred warrior looked around for someone that could help them, but what she saw instead filled her with rage.

Frostheart was still fighting Fernwillow, and the SwiftClan

warrior was covered in blood. Not far off, Birchtail lie wounded and winded, her eyes glossy as she watched the fight unfold. Spottedpath felt her paws freeze when Fernwillow faltered and Frostheart lashed a paw out, raking open a wound along the young warrior's chest. Fernwillow faltered as blood quickly poured from the deep wound, her legs giving out as she stumbled away from Frostheart before her life escaped her.

Spottedpath narrowed her eyes as anger coursed through her veins, steeling her body against the cold that lingered in the air. In her fury, Spottedpath let out a snarl and launched herself at Frostheart before he could do any more damage to Fernwillow or Birchtail. Frostheart reeled on her right before their bodies made contact, raising bared claws to defend himself to the sudden onslaught.

"I won't let you take another innocent life," Spottedpath spat at him before ducking underneath a blow that was aimed at her face. Frostheart opened his mouth to make a snide comeback, but Spottedpath cut the Gorge warrior off with an attack planted fiercely on his cheek. This time, she didn't fight the surge of satisfaction she felt when blood dripped from the wound and spattered onto the ground, nor did she question how his yowl of pain only fueled her desire to fight him.

"You'll pay for that," Frostheart gave a low growl after yanking his head away from her. He pawed at the gashes on his cheek, blood seeping into his paw and fur. Spottedpath ignored his warning and rushed at him again, only to gasp when he rounded on her, flinging an unsheathed paw into her shoulder blade and shoving her to the ground.

Before Spottedpath could react to his attack, Frostheart overpowered her. He gripped onto her pelt with his claws and used his weight to keep her from gaining an upper hand. *I can't let him win!* Spottedpath told herself desperately when her movement became restricted. His grip on her fur only tightened, digging in to pierce her flesh. Panic mixed with the anger and adrenaline that coursed through her blood as Frostheart practically crushed her in his grip. No matter how she attempted to flail about, Frostheart kept digging his claws deeper into her shoulders, preventing her

from breaking out of his grip.

In a last ditch attempt to break free, Spottedpath dug through the memories of her early apprenticeship. Hawkscar had taught her a technique long ago for instances just like this one—had the situation been different, Spottedpath would have chastised herself for having to call upon such painful memories. She closed her eyes and let herself fall limp under Frostheart's grip. Once she felt his grasp on her loosen, she sucked in a breath and wiggled free in a single swift movement. As soon as she broke free, Spottedpath twisted around him, grabbing onto his scruff with her teeth before he had a chance to react to her escape. It took more strength than she knew she had—maybe it was the adrenaline mixed with fury and panic fueling her—but she flung the cloudy-grey warrior across the clearing. Quarreling cats scattered as Frostheart tumbled into them, but it didn't take them long to get back to their brutal fighting.

Like the other battling cats, Frostheart recovered quickly and launched himself back at Spottedpath. This time, he wasted no time in pinning her to the ground, though she made sure to put up a fight. Spottedpath clawed at him desperately, only stopping when her head hit the earthy floor and claws were placed on her throat. With his weight shifted to his front paws and his claws threatening to break the skin, Frostheart leaned forward slowly until his breath tickled the fur of Spottedpath's ear.

"I told you I'd make you pay," Frostheart growled to her, pressing harder until he was restricting her from getting air into her lungs. His claws finally broke the soft skin of her throat, and Spottedpath struggled beneath him as she gasped for breath. The sensation of claws piercing her throat ripped open old wounds that had been buried within her memories.

"If I ever hear of this behavior again, there will be dire consequences." Deadeye's voice echoed through Spottedpath's head as she recalled her confrontation with him when she was only an apprentice. She remembered how he had, without explicitly stating it, threatened to take her life himself—and how he gave her a scar to ensure she would never forget the threat. The sheer terror Spottedpath felt back then manifested itself inside her when

Frostheart's claws dug into her throat. With a final panicked gasp, Spottedpath swung her paw forward, managing to tear it across the Gorge warrior's throat. Blood spurted from the wound onto her as Frostheart reeled back in surprise before crumbling to the ground nearby. His body twitched violently, as if he were trying to cling to the life that quickly escaped him in the form of his blood.

Spottedpath scrambled backwards at the sight, horrified by it. Immediately, guilt and disgust filled her from her ears to the tip of her tail. The ground lurched sickeningly beneath her paws, and Spottedpath found that she couldn't look away from Frostheart's body. Even when the battling cats broke apart and most movement in the camp ceased, she couldn't tear her gaze away. *StarClan, what have I done?* she asked herself as the horror of her actions set in. *I killed him. I* murdered *him.*

Her trembling gaze drifted to a grey blur that approached her quickly, though she hardly reacted when she met Mouseberry's eyes. The grey tom reached a paw out to Spottedpath, but she barely even noticed the action. Her ears were ringing painfully, and she found herself wishing she could hide away forever. *It's all so incredibly loud,* she thought desperately, her gaze flitting around the quiet clearing.

Spottedpath heard a distant call of her name right before Mouseberry nudged her harshly. He spoke her name once more, and this time she could hear it clearly. "Come on. Brackenclaw said that we need to retreat—we have to fall back to NightClan territory and hope they help. It's our only choice."

"W-What?" Spottedpath stammered, finally noticing the state of their camp. Once-sturdy walls were torn apart, and the ground was littered with tufts of fur and painted with spatters of blood. "No. T-The kits, Mouseberry—they stole the kits." Mouseberry fixed her with a reassuring glance, but when he spoke, his voice was hurried.

"I know—everyone knows. It's okay, Spottedpath. We can get them back, but we have to go now. They—" The odd-eyed warrior paused before leaning in and continuing in a hushed tone. "They took a life from Fishstar. He isn't looking too hot, and we *really* have to get out of here."

"What? N-No, I– I just—" Spottedpath broke off as she looked around the clearing. The warriors of the Gorge stood, their heads held proudly as they observed the damage they'd done. Ironheart stood out among them, her expression distraught as she glanced around. Spottedpath's Clanmates were collectively fleeing from the camp, some rather slowly on account of the injuries they'd received. Longstep shot a dismayed gaze over his shoulder as he helped Birchtail walk faster.

"Spottedpath, snap out of it!" Brackenclaw appeared in her vision, his broad shoulders blocking her view of her Clanmates. "We need to go, *now!* Come on!" Without waiting for her response, the deputy spun on his heel and followed their Clanmates out of the camp. Mouseberry nudged the golden warrior again, urging her to follow. Spottedpath spared one final glance around before willing herself forward, fleeing beside her friend.

She sprinted through the familiar SwiftClan territory, the hills of the swampy moorland calling to her as she fled behind her Clanmates. The trek through their own territory and into NightClan territory seemed like a blur to her—she didn't even notice as the terrain changed from boggy hills to a thick forest, the ground laden with layers of pine needles. A few times, Mouseberry had to guide Spottedpath with a soft nudge in one direction, or a gentle tug into the other with his tail over her shoulders; the blue-and-yellow eyed tom seemed to be painfully aware of his friend's dissociation, though he said nothing to her about it. Once they finally reached the NightClan camp, the sight of it snapped Spottedpath back to reality.

In front of the wounded SwiftClan cats sat an enormous oak tree —bigger than life itself, Spottedpath thought. The roots of the tree lifted out of the ground, towering over them as they stretched into the forest. Walls of interwoven brambles and dried plants wrapped around the tree, seeming like an impenetrable fortress to the injured Clan. Not long after they arrived, Spottedpath saw Harestar emerge from the camp entrance, her pale amber eyes twinkling with worry.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded, her tone sharp. From the way the light brown leader let her gaze travel over the

cats, Spottedpath could see that she knew what had happened already. "Fishstar? Oh, StarClan, what happened to you?" Harestar's gaze fell to Fishstar, who was being supported between a wounded Hollyheart and Brackenclaw.

"The Gorge attacked us," Brackenclaw responded for the leader, his voice ringing into the forest. "They drove us out of our camp. We have nowhere else to go, Harestar." Spottedpath leaned forward when Harestar surveyed the injured cats in front of her, her eyes glittering as she silently thought over her options.

"Alright," she murmured after a moment, "the Clan won't like this, but they'll have to understand. They know we've never truly seen the full force of Deadeye's threats, but I knew this day would come. Come along, and send your wounded warriors to the medicine den immediately."

Spottedpath followed her Clan closely as they entered the NightClan camp. Inside the tunnel of an entrance, she could hear a buzz of activity from the cats inside—when they entered the camp, it immediately fell silent. Curious gazes took in the sight of the SwiftClan warriors, though not a single cat dared to whisper about it. Spottedpath kept her head low as she padded next to Mouseberry, who stayed close enough to her that his fur brushed against hers comfortingly. When she let her gaze stray across the camp, Spottedpath locked eyes with Tigerflight and immediately looked away from the black tom.

"You should get seen for those injuries," Mouseberry murmured in her ear before giving her a gentle nudge. "They look pretty serious." Spottedpath started at his words and looked over herself slowly, realizing she was still bleeding from some of her wounds.

"Oh, y-yeah . . . thanks," she murmured, grateful that he reminded her of herself. Spottedpath touched her nose to his briefly before following the rest of the injured cats to crowd around the medicine den, which rested fittingly underneath one of the larger roots. She noticed Dapplecloud not far away, fretting noisily about Fernwillow.

"Has anyone seen my sister?" she called out desperately, her

tortoiseshell fur standing on end. "Anyone? Please!" Spottedpath swallowed painfully and approached Muddapple where he sat with the other medicine cats.

"Um, Muddapple," she whispered hoarsely, her gaze stuck to the ground, "Fernwillow died, and I don't . . . I don't know how to tell her." The golden tabby flicked an ear in the direction of Dapplecloud. The molly was still rushing from cat to cat, asking about her sister.

" . . . stay nearby," Muddapple murmured after a moment with a nod. He stood and headed to Dapplecloud, while Spottedpath inched away from the other medicine cats and watched. Muddapple hesitated, but Spottedpath saw him speak to her slowly, reaching a paw out to her when her expression grew wild and distraught. Spottedpath felt her heart twist in her chest at the sight, remembering how she felt when Riverdash died. *Nobody should have to experience that,* she thought bitterly, unable to tear her gaze away.

Muddapple touched Dapplecloud's shoulder reassuringly with his tail before returning to Tigerflight and Brightpelt. He uttered a few words to them, and then he and the NightClan medicine cat made their way to Spottedpath while Brightpelt floated from victim to victim. Spottedpath fixed Tigerflight with a wary gaze, which the faint black tabby tom matched with a steely one.

"Yes, I know," he spoke before either of the SwiftClan cats could. "Brightpelt felt the SwiftClan warriors would be more comfortable if someone they knew tended to them, and you . . . well, sit still while I clean your wounds and fetch cobwebs to stop the bleeding." Spottedpath nodded without responding, though her eyes strayed to Muddapple, who hadn't moved to help Brightpelt.

"Actually, I need her to recount what she saw during the battle while you do that," Muddapple interjected, stepping closer and sitting purposefully. "Brightpelt and I were trying to ensure we saved enough herbs to treat the wounded. Spottedpath?" The blue-eyed warrior met his gaze, not flinching as Tigerflight inspected her wounds callously. Muddapple's golden eyes bore into her own, searching as always. With a deep breath, Spottedpath spoke.

"I was leaving the nursery to get help—Deadeye had ordered the warriors to steal the kits, and they threatened to kill them if I interfered. I– I didn't know what else to do. When I looked for help, I saw Frostheart . . . kill Fernwillow, and I just lost it. He . . . he overpowered me," she whispered, realizing again what she had done. Guilt overflowed from inside her, and she could feel herself cracking from within. "I– oh, StarClan, I didn't mean to– he was choking me, Muddapple, and it just triggered t-these memories, and– it wasn't my intention to—"

"That's enough, Spottedpath, don't hurt yourself with it," Muddapple murmured to her hurriedly, fixing her with a serious gaze. "He was going to kill you if you didn't defend yourself, and that's what matters."

The brown tabby scooted forward and took over for Tigerflight, his paws moving much more tenderly through Spottedpath's bloodied fur. The NightClan medicine cat backed up with a soft grunt of acknowledgement, his eyes following Muddapple's movements.

"There are others that could use your help, Tigerflight," Muddapple muttered to him, his intense gaze not once leaving Spottedpath. Tigerflight made his leave, finding Brightpelt in the crowd. Spottedpath took the opportunity to ground herself, and in doing so she realized just how gently Muddapple was treating her wounds. She lost any words she might have been about to say as he carefully cleaned her fur and applied cobwebs and poultices to some of her injuries. Most medicine cats Spottedpath knew, save for Skyfeather, had been rather callous in their work. Admittedly, Spottedpath's senses were already heightened—and exhausted—from the toll the battle had taken on her, so she paid more attention to his work than she would have at any other time. Her mind wandered back to Frostheart, and her resurfacing guilt swept away her brief peace.

"Muddapple, I killed him," Spottedpath whispered after a moment, her heart feeling shaky inside her chest.

"Yes, you did. He killed Ferndapple, and he would have killed you if you didn't kill him first," Muddapple muttered around a few

leaves of goldenrod. "By the sounds of it, it isn't the first time something like that has happened—by the scars I see on your throat, I know that's the truth."

Spottedpath lost her words again when Muddapple spoke to her. He leaned forward with a wet ball of moss hooked in his claws, working to clean the blood from around the fur of her neck. He applied a poultice of marigold and goldenrod onto the fresh wounds before tentatively covering the poultice with a layer of cobwebs.

"Look," Muddapple mewed after a few heartbeats, "I know that a lot has happened for you recently, and that you're still processing it all, but don't worry about what you have or haven't done. Right now, we really need to worry about the future—as unfair as it is, you alone can influence how this plays out." He finished dressing Spottedpath's wounds and pulled back, creating more of a distance between himself and the slightly flustered warrior.

"It's because of you that hope has been born," Spottedpath recited Ivorystar's words to her under her breath. *Is that true?* she wondered to herself, trying her hardest to work out where her own puzzle piece would fit in.

"What?" Muddapple perked his ears and twitched his whiskers, his golden eyes sparking with curiosity.

"It was just . . . something someone told me recently," Spottedpath murmured softly, meeting his gaze. Though guilt still lingered inside of her, she felt a sense of what could only be resolve start to creep inside of her. "Muddapple, I know I've changed from when I first came to SwiftClan, but I hope you know that I'm ready to embrace . . . all of this. Though I don't understand why I've been chosen, I understand my responsibility, and I'm going to help however I can."

Muddapple studied her carefully in response. "Good. Brightpelt and I will figure out what to do. You need to go get rest—just because your wounds weren't life-threatening doesn't mean they weren't bad. Go on, now."

Spottedpath nodded and, without another word, rose to her

paws and left to find her friends. She spotted Mouseberry sitting next to Mosspuddle at the edge of the clearing and silently joined the siblings. They both greeted her with solemn eyes, and Spottedpath gave them a serious nod before sitting and lowering her head next to them. Her wounds of the day had finally caught up to her, and her body felt like she was on fire and drowning all at once, a dangerous turbulence that would drag her under if she didn't act carefully.

Chapter 27

Sunrises after Harestar took in the SwiftClan cats, the two Clans were finally beginning to mingle with one another. Cats from both Clans were sharing tongues, offering prey to one another, and sharing stories as the SwiftClan cats recovered from their injuries and started helping with hunting and gathering. Mosspuddle had become acquainted with two younger warriors who had introduced themselves as Sandstripe and Whitebriar, and often sat with them throughout the day while Spottedpath and Mouseberry chatted.

Not far from the medicine den, Spottedpath noticed Juniperstorm sitting next to Cottontuft, grief written on both of their faces. Along the opposite walls of the camp, Dapplecloud and Haildapple sat together with their heads lowered. Brackenclaw was nearby, his head only slightly lowered compared to the two mollies, as if he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Spottedpath let her gaze travel to a group of NightClan cats and noticed Birchtail and Mirepelt sitting with them, the former sporting several sizable wounds from her fight with Frostheart. For the first time, Spottedpath realized the two warriors shared similar builds—lean, like Fishstar, from moons of running on the moorlands, but not nearly as muscular as Brackenclaw.

Leaning up against the massive tree that sheltered the camp were several piles of large boulders. At the base of one pile, where two boulders leaned against one another to form a cave beneath them, Spottedpath could see Harestar speaking with Fishstar. Just as she was about to point them out to Mouseberry, who had been gawking at the scenery of the NightClan camp, the two leaders climbed onto a thick root that jutted out of the ground. The conversations that buzzed around the camp died off slowly when cats noticed their patient position.

"Now that the cats of SwiftClan are in a more stable state, I have decided to send Gorsefeather and Dewfrost to RushClan," Harestar spoke, her light voice ringing around the camp. "Kinkstar needs to

know about what has happened, and those two are the swiftest warriors in the Clan. It won't be long before they return."

Spottedpath inched forward slowly with Mouseberry close behind her. Every movement caused her aching wounds to burn, but she wanted to get a better spot to listen to the announcements. When she got close enough, Spottedpath noticed that Fishstar had an uneasy look in his usually confident green eyes. *He's on his final life, now,* Spottedpath reminded herself, feeling worry form in her stomach. Though he'd physically recovered from losing a life in the battle at the SwiftClan camp, it was clear to Spottedpath that he had fallen into a state of anxiety.

"I know this is sudden," Harestar continued speaking, her tone level as she addressed her Clanmates, "but keep in mind that these cats just lost their home—their entire territory. We cannot expect Deadeye to end it at that, so we must prepare for the event of a declaration of war against the Clans."

"That's right," Mouseberry murmured gravely from behind Spottedpath, startling her. "He won't stop until he controls the entire forest." Spottedpath frowned as sympathy for her friend rose within her. *He's been so much more serious since the attack,* she thought sadly. *He's hardly even spoken to the NightClan cats.*

"They've already murdered the previous SwiftClan deputy, Grassheart, in cold blood," Harestar narrowed her eyes and stepped forward, while Fishstar lowered his head slightly. "Now, he's taken more lives and even stooped to kidnapping kits. It's an inexcusable crime of war, and no matter what happens, Deadeye must answer for his actions."

Immediately, the clearing erupted with howls of agreement. The chorus of support rang from cats of both Clans, with some of the NightClan cats just as loud as those from SwiftClan. Spottedpath glanced around in surprise. *I didn't expect the NightClan cats to be so supportive!* she thought in astonishment when a golden molly that she came to know as Honeyheart leaped to the front of the crowd.

"We'll make them pay!" she cried out, determination dripping from her voice. Behind her, Petalheart sat with her head held high.

Brackenclaw had appeared next to the NightClan deputy, and Spottedpath caught sight of an unsettling glint as it flashed in his eyes. Lionpelt, a thick-furred golden tabby, and Greythorn, a grey molly with long, tangled fur, stepped forward after Honeyheart disappeared back into the crowd.

"This is war! This is war!" they started chanting while walking in circles, stomping their paws dramatically against the forest floor with every step. Soon, the entire clearing had joined in with the chant, the crowd rippling back and forth as they did so. Spottedpath blinked and exchanged a glance with Mouseberry. The atmosphere of the clearing filled her with an odd mixture of anxiety and determination, and she could see the same feelings swimming in her friend's eyes. *Everyone is ready to jump right into war,* she thought uneasily.

"Settle down, everyone!" Harestar called out, though pride glimmered clearly in her amber eyes as she watched her Clan. "I believe it is also time to tell you of a prophecy that was delivered to some of the medicine cats many moons ago—during the coldest moon of the last leafbare. The prophecy says that all four Clans must work together to defeat Deadeye—if we can manage that, we will earn our victory!" Spottedpath hid her surprise at the revelation, though she couldn't keep it from setting her thoughts ablaze, not unlike the buzz of excitement that rose from the surrounding crowd. *Another prophecy?* she wondered, letting her gaze briefly flicker to Muddapple. The brown-furred medicine cat's expression was unreadable, as were those of his fellow medicine cats. *From before . . . before I was even born? Is that why they were so adamant about me being in SwiftClan?* Mouseberry nudged Spottedpath suddenly, startling her and dragging her out of her thoughts.

"We're making history here, Spottedpath!" he whispered excitedly, his blue and yellow eyes twinkling. His previous anxiety had vanished entirely from his expression, though the determination was still present. "This'll be a battle they talk about for seasons! They'll tell stories of it, even after we die! We could become heroes, Spottedpath!"

Spottedpath couldn't help cringing at his words as they

reminded her of the weight that had settled on her shoulders. No matter how hard she rejected Shadestar and his delirious dreams, Spottedpath knew now that she had to do everything she could think of to help the Clans. According to their starry-furred ancestors, she was the *only* one who could truly change the tides of this war. They had rested all their hope, the hope of past legends, on her. The knowledge of their expectations made Spottedpath want to do nothing other than disappear, though she knew she couldn't.

She wasn't given too much time to worry about her responsibilities to the Clans, however. The bramble tunnel that served as the entrance to the camp quivered violently, silencing the cats inside the camp as it demanded their attention. After a few apprehensive moments, Gorsefeather and Dewfrost emerged from the tunnel. The tense atmosphere immediately dissipated, though Spottedpath's remained when she saw how winded they were. *They look like they were in a hurry to return,* she thought, growing worried. Harestar's attention immediately zeroed in on the two breathless warriors, her ears perked curiously.

"What did Kinkstar have to say?" she queried, twitching the tip of her tail at the end of her question. The two messengers exchanged an uneasy glance that confirmed Spottedpath's worries. Spottedpath held her breath as Gorsefeather stepped forward to answer Harestar's question.

"Actually, they've found themselves caught in a . . . rather similar situation," the orange-and-white tabby mewed hesitantly. Spottedpath frowned at the response, glancing back to the two leaders briefly.

"What do you mean?" Harestar's voice fell flat, though now there was a slight edge to it; it was an edge that ignited a tangible feeling of unease across the clearing. Beside her, Fishstar leaned forward, worry written across his face and his tail twitching quickly. The warriors surrounding Spottedpath gave murmurs that matched his concern.

"Deadeye sent warriors to drive out the BlazeClan cats the same night they drove out SwiftClan. They stole kits from BlazeClan, too,

and a queen was injured trying to save them," Dewfrost spoke up this time, her pale blue-grey fur bristling more and more with each word. "Their medicine cat was wounded, too, and it sounds like they've many more who are suffering from grave injuries."

"Oh, StarClan."

Whispers immediately spread through the camp as Harestar dug her claws furiously into the root she perched on with Fishstar. Spottedpath found herself leaning forward as worry formed a pit in her stomach. *Blueheart or Skyfeather got attacked? And they hurt Spiderclaw for trying to defend her kits?* she fretted internally, pacing on her front paws anxiously. *And StarClan knows how many others are hurt! This is worse than I thought—Deadeye* needs *to be stopped.* When he noticed Spottedpath's fretting, Mouseberry stepped forward and caught her attention with a gentle prod to her shoulder.

"Hey, they were strong enough to survive this far. They'll be okay, don't worry," he murmured reassuringly, his eyes soft with concern. "Besides, all of the Clans are supporting each other. Nothing could go wrong here—we'll win this in the end." Spottedpath held his gaze for a few moments before forcing a hesitant nod.

"I hope you're right," she whispered, though she didn't feel at all convinced by his words. Sure, the BlazeClan cats were hardy, but Deadeye was ruthless, as were his warriors. Spottedpath knew—no, *everyone* in the Clans knew of the horrors Deadeye could inflict, no matter how ignorant they pretended to be.

"Our medicine cats," Fishstar's voice startled Spottedpath, "should visit Starfalls for guidance while the rest of of prepare. Perhaps we should call an emergency Gathering, as well—*excluding* the Gorge." *Visit Starfalls for what?* she thought, and for once it was more curious than bitter. *Do they really think the ancestors can give us more advice than they already have? An emergency Gathering would be much more productive.* Spottedpath shook her head free of her thoughts as Harestar moved to respond.

"It only takes one," Harestar reminded him cautiously, lowering

her voice. Spottedpath shot Mouseberry a pointed glance and started inching closer to the arching root. "Tigerflight should stay and ensure that the medicine den is stocked, and one of your medicine cats should stay to help him. We can't waste any time preparing ourselves."

"I'll go," Muddapple spoke up not far from Spottedpath. Without waiting for a response from the leaders, he turned to the golden warrior, his own amber gaze searching hers. "Spottedpath can accompany me when I go." Spottedpath opened her mouth to respond, but Harestar beat her to it.

"Why?" The light brown tabby watched Spottedpath curiously, making the young molly's fur crawl. She knew that a fair amount of these cats recognized her as that tiny Gorge apprentice from several moons ago—it was clear in the way they cast her glances when they thought she wasn't looking.

"In case you've forgotten, Deadeye just caused the deaths of several cats and kidnapped kits from two Clans—on top of that, he's driven both of those Clans out of their territory. Forgive me if I'd feel just a tad bit safer if a warrior from my own Clan accompanied me to Starfalls." Muddapple whipped around and fixed Harestar with a steady gaze, though the tone he took surprised Spottedpath. The last time she'd seen any kind of medicine cat address a leader so confidently was when Frozenleaf was criticizing Deadeye for making his kits apprentices.

Harestar opened her mouth to speak, clearly taken aback by the suddenness of Muddapple's tone. Spottedpath winced in preparation for a swift retort from the NightClan leader. Instead, right when she was about to speak, Fishstar took a few pawsteps forward and cleared his throat to catch Harestar's attention. After Spottedpath watched them share a silent but meaningful glance, Harestar gave a sigh and turned back to the SwiftClan medicine cat.

"Very well. Try not to take too long—we need as much help as we can get around here." The light brown tabby waved him off with her paw, clearly still a bit flustered by the tone he took with her.

Muddapple nodded dutifully and sent another glance toward

Spottedpath's direction. "I'll stay and help until the sun sets. It's better to visit Starfalls during the night, anyways. Spottedpath, I'll fetch you when I'm ready."

With that, Muddapple turned and found his way to Tigerflight. The leaders hopped off of the tree root and retreated into Harestar's den—the cave that Spottedpath had noticed was wedged between two massive boulders. Spottedpath watched them wordlessly, dazed from the interaction she'd just had and the fact that she hadn't gotten a word in edgewise. Mouseberry let out a gentle laugh from beside her when he noticed the state she was in.

"He didn't really give you time to accept that, did he?" Mouseberry chuckled. "My dad said he's a lot like Fishstar in that aspect."

"Like Fishstar?" Spottedpath echoed softly, not sure what that was supposed to mean. Mouseberry must have seen the confusion written on her face, because he gave another amused snort.

"You didn't know? Muddapple is Fishstar's son!" Mouseberry snorted playfully.

"Well I knew Mirepelt was, at least!" Spottedpath retorted, mocking exasperation with a playful huff. "Is Birchtail their sister? I noticed she and Mirepelt look alike—like smaller versions Fishstar, almost!"

Mouseberry nodded quickly. "Yep! They're pretty quiet about it because older warriors used to accuse Fishstar of favoring them." Spottedpath felt a pang of sympathy for the family. She might not have been close to everyone in her family, but she still couldn't have imagined feeling pressured to stay quiet about her lineage.

"Wow, that's terrible. I can't believe anyone thought he would do that!" she murmured softly. Her gaze made its way to Dapplecloud again, where the tortoiseshell molly sat alone at the edge of the camp. "What about Dapplecloud? H-Her family besides Fernwillow, I mean."

"Well, their parents are Haildapple and Brackenclaw,"

Mouseberry mumbled, "Brackenclaw never seemed close to the other three, though, but we never questioned it." Spottedpath narrowed her eyes at the mention of the new deputy and began searching the crowd for him.

"Speaking of Brackenclaw," Spottedpath mewed, lowering her voice so that only Mouseberry could hear, "have you noticed anything odd about him lately?"

"No, why?" the odd-eyed warrior leaned back with a twitch of his whiskers. "Have you?" Spottedpath turned toward him, meeting his curious blue-and-gold gaze with one of uncertainty.

"I don't know," she responded quietly, suddenly feeling bad about asking her friend the question. "Maybe it's just nothing. The last few moons have really taken their toll on me, I guess." Spottedpath offered a sheepish shrug when Mouseberry squinted at her.

"Yeah, it seems like they really have," he finally responded after a moment. "A lot has happened, and you've seemed a bit withdrawn ever since—"

"Harestar, one of Deadeye's warriors is heading straight to our camp!"

Within an instant, the cats inside the camp were on their paws. The sound of their surprised voices ripped through the clearing, disorienting Spottedpath as she sprang angrily to her feet. Beside her, Mouseberry stirred restlessly.

"Spottedpath . . . ." She turned to him and saw that he was watching her closely. His eyes traveled to her paws, and she realized that she had started furiously digging her claws into the soft earth beneath her. She turned her head back to the entrance of the camp, her thoughts whirling around vigorously inside her head.

"Mouseberry, why would he only send one warrior?" Spottedpath questioned quietly when she was unable to put meaning to her thoughts.

"To . . . send a message?" Mouseberry responded, though he sounded unsure of his answer. Spottedpath shook her head in response.

"No, we'd never let them leave," Spottedpath narrowed her eyes as a commotion grew from the entrance of the camp. The crowds surged forward, blocking whoever had arrived from Spottedpath's sight. "What if it's a distraction?"

"A distraction?" Mouseberry echoed, finally standing and taking a step forward. "For what?"

The two friends exchanged dark glances that shared their unspoken worries of Deadeye's plots. Without another word, Spottedpath started shouldering her way through the noisy crowd of cats with Mouseberry close on her tail. When she got to the last few cats in her way, they refused to move, so Spottedpath found herself weaving between their bodies to get in front of them. There, cowering meekly in front of the two camp guards who'd met her outside, was Spottedpath's best friend.

"Nightpaw?" she whispered softly, all the anger in her evaporating into a stormy combination of relief and concern. Spottedpath took a few pawsteps forward, only to freeze when she caught the attention of both NightClan and SwiftClan cats.

Cats in the back of the crowd gave startled yelps as another cat forced their way to the camp entrance, undoubtedly stomping on tails as they did so. Spottedpath tore her gaze away from Nightpaw to watch for the newcomer, and felt a pit form in her stomach when she was met with Harestar's fiery gaze.

"Explain yourself," the NightClan leader demanded, the furious tone in her voice causing even her own Clanmates to back away.

"M-My name is Nightstream, ma'am. I— I know, it might be difficult to trust me after what Deadeye has done, but I . . . I want to help the Clans. He's gotten out of control."

A shocked silence settled over the camp as Harestar held Nightstream's gaze. Spottedpath let her gaze flit anxiously between

her friend and Harestar. Had she not been crouching, Nightstream would have towered over the leader; though Harestar was still larger than the young warrior in every other aspect, and Spottedpath had come to know she was a force to be reckoned with.

"You expect me to believe that?" Harestar demanded after a few moments. "You expect me to believe that Deadeye would be so careless after so blatantly declaring war on the Clans—so careless that you'd successfully sneak out to *help us?"* Nightstream slowly stood up as Harestar spoke each venomous word, her amber eyes sparkling with the same determination Spottedpath had felt welling up inside her for so long.

"Please, allow me to help," Nightstream requested again, her voice much more confident than it had been before. "I want to help you rescue those kits."

Author's Note: Soo, Spottedpath did a *ton* of thinking this chapter—with her overthinking mind, everything gets a second thought and a second glance. The next few chapters are so spicy that I'm almost tempted to post them now, though. o(□□ □)o As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter ♡

Chapter 28

Spottedpath sat close to Nightstream at the edges of the camp. An overhanging root provided shade from the cold evening sun, and though it chilled Spottedpath to the bone, it was the only shelter they had from curious eyes and judgemental glares. Mouseberry sat a few mouse-lengths away from Spottedpath, his ears perked curiously as he listened to the chatting mollies.

At first, Spottedpath had been certain that Harestar would have Nightstream imprisoned instead of accepting her help—the NightClan leader was furious, and rightfully so. All of the Clan cats harbored justified anger toward the Gorge cats, but Spottedpath *knew* that Nightstream's words were genuine. She'd stepped forward and vouched for her, and when she did so, Fishstar eased up and convinced Harestar to accept Nighstream's offer.

"I've never been the target of so many glares," Nightstream whispered, shifting awkwardly in the shade of the oak tree. "They look so . . . I don't know, *accusing*. Like I've done something wrong."

"That's an automatic perk of being from the Gorge," Spottedpath responded sarcastically, though feelings of empathy for the pretty she-cat rose inside her chest. *It's hard, knowing you've done nothing wrong but being faulted for what happened,* she thought, remembering how poorly the cats of BlazeClan treated her at first. "They'll learn to trust you with time, don't worry."

"What about him?" Nightstream nodded toward the curious Mouseberry. "You're one of the only ones who hasn't given me the same withering look as everyone else."

Mouseberry twitched his whiskers and shrugged nonchalantly. "Hey, if Spottedpath trusts you, then I trust you."

Spottedpath blinked gratefully at Mouseberry, relieved that he hadn't said anything to make Nightstream more uncomfortable than

she already seemed. She turned her gaze back to her friend, starting to grow a bit interested in what had happened since they last spoke. After a moment of hesitation, Spottedpath decided to get her own curiosity off of her chest.

"So, you and your siblings earned your warrior ceremonies?" she murmured softly, watching Nightstream's expression closely. The grey molly cringed a bit at the question, but it was so slight that Spottedpath wondered if she had even truly seen it.

"After the, er . . . raids on SwiftClan and BlazeClan, Deadeye granted us our names," Nightstream mewed, her eyes glittering guiltily. "He said we earned it by stealing the kits—but Rabbitflight and I didn't even steal them. We were going to say the queen was too strong for us, but Greyheart showed up and finished the job for us. Pearlstep seemed really proud of it, though."

"Of course she did," Spottedpath muttered sourly. "She and Dustleap threatened to kill the kits if I tried to stop them. Can you even imagine?"

Nightstream shook her head sadly, letting out a soft sigh. "They're both so cruel. I knew that when Riverdash didn't come back, Dustleap had to have killed him. I saw him follow Riverdash, and I was going to follow him, but Pearlstep stopped me and I didn't want her to know about it." Her tone carried a hint of guilt on it, and Spottedpath frowned a bit.

"Nightstream, about that . . . ." Spottedpath reached a paw out to her friend. *She needs to know about Pearlstep and Brownpaw,* she decided.

"Spottedpath, I was so scared that he had hurt you, too," Nightstream interrupted her, leaning forward and inspecting the fresh scars on Spottedpath's face. Spottedpath twitched her whiskers, surprised at the sudden lack of distance between them.

"Well, I'm okay now, right?" she murmured sheepishly. "A-Anyways, Pearlstep already knew—she must have eavesdropped on your conversation with Riverdash, because she's the one who told Dustleap. She's also the one who told Deadeye about—" Spottedpath

reminded herself of Mouseberry's presence and lowered her voice "—my dreams."

"I should have known," Nightstream pulled back and gave Spottedpath an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Spottedpath, I should have been more careful."

"No, it's in the past now, Nightstream," Spottedpath reassured her quickly. "You're not at fault for anything. There was something else Dustleap mentioned that night, though . . . ."

"What was it?" Nightstream's eyes shone with a mixture of curiosity and unease.

"He mentioned Brownpaw's death, but his wording, um . . . ." Spottedpath hesitated, then sighed and decided to get it over with. "He said Brownpaw was pushed off of the cliff—he didn't fall on accident. I have a feeling Thornheart is the one who pushed him, too."

"O-Oh." Nightstream's shaky voice tore Spottedpath's heart into pieces.

"I'm sorry, Nightstream," Spottedpath whispered sympathetically. "Things shouldn't have been like this."

"No, no. Like you said, it's all in the past now," Nightstream gave a hesitant nod and cast her gaze away from Spottedpath. "We need to focus on saving those kits."

A slightly more comfortable silence rested over the three warriors. Spottedpath noticed that Mouseberry looked like he was only half-listening; his odd-colored eyes were trained lazily on a patch of sunlight not far away, and his expression was blank. The golden warrior had to hold back a chuckle as she nudged Nightstream and pointed to him. Nightstream let out a gentle laugh before turning to Spottedpath once more.

"Hey, Spottedpath . . . ."

"What is it?" Spottedpath held Nightstream's gaze, growing uneasy with how intently the dark grey molly stared at her.

"I know you're putting a lot at risk by vouching for me—" Spottedpath narrowed her eyes, not even wanting to hear the rest of it.

"No, Nightstream. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't do everything to save those kits," she interrupted, giving Nightstream a serious look. "Besides, you're my best friend—nobody else comes close. I trust you more than anything, Nightstream."

Nightstream didn't respond as a surprised expression made its way onto her face. It was short-lived, however, as a look of sheepishness took over. Spottedpath gave a satisfied nod when her friend showed no sign of protesting against her statements. After a few moments, Spottedpath realized how forward her words were and found herself growing flustered in the silence that rested over them.

The only thing that broke the silence was Muddapple's approach. Spottedpath perked her ears when she heard his footsteps, easily recognizing the pattern of his step before she saw him—before her friends noticed him, as well. Once he came into sight, however, Spottedpath saw that he had an amused glint in his eyes.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting anything," Muddapple spoke formally, though his eyes continued to betray how he felt. "Spottedpath, it's time for us to head to Starfalls—we need to be back before Deadeye has time to notice Nightstream's absence."

Spottedpath gave a nod before rising to her paws. Briefly, she touched her muzzle to Nightstream's. Then she turned to Mouseberry, who had reigned his attention back in, and mewed, "Make sure nobody messes with her, okay? She hasn't done anything to deserve that kind of harassment." A look of realization flickered across Mouseberry's expression before he curled his lips into a teasing smile.

"Right," he responded, drawing the word out deliberately. "I'll look after her for you, don't worry." Spottedpath gave him a weird look, not sure why he was acting odd all of a sudden.

"Um, okay. Thanks, Mouseberry," she mewed hesitantly. Beside

her, Spottedpath swore she heard Muddapple let out a snicker, but when she turned to him she saw that he was already heading toward the camp entrance.

Spottedpath held back an exasperated sigh and took off after the medicine cat. She caught up to him at the bramble tunnel, and then the two of them padded off through the forest together. The sun had sunk so that it was barely peeking over the horizon, its light barely filtering through the leaves of the thickly forested NightClan territory. The journey to Starfalls was much shorter than her first journey with Skyfeather and Blueheart, though it was just as quiet and tense.

The moon was barely visible when they arrived at the edge of the clearing, but shimmering mist was already weaving its way through the trees. Spottedpath felt her fur tingle when she stepped into a thicker patch of mist, and she had to hold back a shudder when it chilled her. Muddapple hardly waited for her before entering the clearing and making his way to the edge of the starry pool. Spottedpath hesitated before padding up to the water and sitting down nonchalantly.

"You do remember how it's done, don't you?" Muddapple spoke over the sound of the waterfall, his gaze serious. "I know it hasn't been too long, but . . . ."

"Of course I do," Spottedpath retorted lightly. After a moment of thought, she narrowed her eyes and took on a mocking tone. "I thought I was here to protect you, though."

"Don't be ridiculous," Muddapple rolled his eyes. "That was to get Harestar to drop the subject. You're the one most likely to receive a message right now, but I'll be dreaming as well, just in case."

"You're the one who singled me out during a Clan meeting," Spottedpath quipped playfully, ignoring the second part of what the medicine cat said.

Muddapple gave a lighthearted sigh and feigned a look of annoyance. "Okay, okay, you've made your point. Get to dreaming,

Spottedpath."

It was Spottedpath's turn to playfully roll her eyes at the medicine cat. Together, the two cats settled at the edge of the pool. Spottedpath watched as Muddapple touched his nose to the water, his breathing immediately slowing as he drifted into a deep sleep. She glanced around them hesitantly before following suit, hardly flinching at the ice-cold touch of the water.

When she opened her eyes, Spottedpath saw that she was in the signature starry, unfamiliar forest of StarClan. She took a few heartbeats to examine the undergrowth surrounding her, and came to the realization that something about it felt off. *There are no StarClan cats here,* Spottedpath thought warily. *Why would I dream myself here?* When she cast her gaze around, she noticed that she was surrounded by a thick layer of fog, and that there was a clearing up ahead of her.

Spottedpath padded forward slowly until she entered the clearing, finding that it was free of the fog that enclosed the forest. *Wait a moment, I know this place!* Spottedpath immediately remembered the dream she'd had of the hawk—moments before the omen that had predicted Hawkscar's death, she'd been in this very clearing with Frozenleaf pleading to their distant ancestors.

As if the memory had summoned the dainty healer, Spottedpath saw a flash of white fur and reeled when Frozenleaf entered the clearing. Her icy gaze looked just as desperate now as it had back then, scanning the clearing for a sign of the StarClan cats. When she saw Spottedpath, Frozenleaf froze, her expression becoming guarded.

"Spottedpath," she greeted coolly, not moving a muscle. Her piercing blue gaze seemed to reach right into Spottedpath's soul; it was as unnerving as ever.

"Frozenleaf." Spottedpath adopted the same cool tone, unsure of whether or not the healer could be trusted. After all, for so long it had seemed as though Frozenleaf was the one who outed her to Deadeye—Hawkscar had even warned against confiding in the white molly.

After a few moments of unbearable silence, Frozenleaf narrowed her eyes and spoke again. "So, the ancestors chose you to redeem MistClan?" Spottedpath held Frozenleaf's gaze steadily, though she was inwardly taken aback. *How would she know that Shadestar was looking for someone to help?* she wondered and found herself searching the healer's expression. Spottedpath knew that Shadestar couldn't speak to Frozenleaf even if he wanted to—if he could, why would the ancestors have sent a prophecy to the other medicine cats, and not her?

"What are you doing here?" Spottedpath demanded after a moment of thought. "I didn't come here for you."

"You weren't exactly the one I wanted to dream with, either," Frozenleaf scoffed. Her tone dripped with sarcasm, and Spottedpath had to hold back a snarl in response. The healer acted as though *she* had a reason to be upset with Spottedpath, and it wore the golden tabby's patience down quickly.

"Have you even seen what's happening?" she snapped angrily, narrowing her eyes and stepping forward. "Deadeye is destroying the Clans bit by bit, piece by fragile piece, and *you*—all you're doing is watching the world burn around you."

"You don't understand the position I'm in," Frozenleaf growled through gritted teeth, though her expression remained guarded. "Not all of us can run away from our problems, Spottedpath."

"Run away?" Spottedpath reeled backwards incredulously. "Oh, that is *rich*. Deadeye was going to have me *killed*, Frozenleaf. He murdered Hawkscar! And you? Instead of trying to help, you were busy worrying about whether I was *having* dreams in the first place."

Frozenleaf faltered and guilt clouded over her expression. "Look, I'm sorry. The ancestors haven't spoken to me in *seasons*, and I've become desperate." Spottedpath couldn't help the urge to roll her eyes at the healer. *Shadestar said he hasn't been able to contact her either, though if it were me, I wouldn't have trusted her enough to care,* she thought sourly as she glared at Frozenleaf.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they never spoke to you again, after all you've allowed to happen," Spottedpath spat, twitching her tail tip. "We'll save those kits, and we *will* win this war no matter what you or Deadeye do. His reign of terror will come to an end, you'll see."

A brief silence followed her words as a look of realization graced Frozenleaf's face. "So that's where Nightstream ran off to," she murmured softly. The words surprised Spottedpath, and the young warrior quickly realized she'd said too much. With a much gentler tone, Frozenleaf spoke again, "Spottedpath, you need to understand that everything I have done was to protect those who live in the Gorge."

"Yeah, right," Spottedpath snarled quickly, barely letting the healer finish her sentence. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Frozenleaf. I just hope all the guilt you have to carry is worth it in the end."

Without another word, Spottedpath turned on her heels and stormed away from Frozenleaf—as far as the wall of fog allowed her to go. Once she'd reached the limit, Spottedpath screwed her eyes shut, willing herself to wake up. *I want out of this cursed forest,* she thought angrily. As soon as the feeling of fog tendrils winding around her body faded, she snapped her eyes open again, just to find herself in yet another unfamiliar forest. This time, however, it glowed in the starry sunlight of StarClan.

Spottedpath stomped her paw against the sun-dappled earth and let out a groan of annoyance. "Shadestar, I swear, if you're here to give me another *stupid* vision—"

"You should be easier on Frozenleaf, you know. She was being honest, for once."

Spottedpath froze in the middle of her sentence at the new speaker; it was a voice that she hadn't heard in a long time. Her heart started to pound painfully inside her chest, feeling as if it would burst right through her ribcage. *No way,* she thought as her breath quickened and hitched in her throat.

Slowly, Spottedpath turned around, almost scared to meet the owner of the voice. Somewhere deep inside, she felt frightened that this was some kind of trick orchestrated by Shadestar to demand her attention. Even deeper than that, though, was a spark of hope that what she'd heard—that voice—was real.

She lost her breath when she came face to face with none other than Hawkscar. His amber eyes, though now full of the same stars that lined Silverpelt, held the same warmth that they always did. The corners of his mouth were pulled back in a soft and kindhearted smile as he rocked back on his haunches nonchalantly.

"Y-You . . . you're here," Spottedpath whispered as she let go of a breath she didn't know she was holding. "You're . . . actually here."

"I'm sorry I couldn't speak to you sooner," Hawkscar mewed apologetically, his eyes twinkling in the sunlight. "It must have been hard for you."

Spottedpath met his gaze, her muscles taut and any words she wanted to speak becoming lost in the air. She took a few pawsteps forward, feeling like one wrong step could make her mentor vanish into the forest without warning. Even so, she desperately wanted to reach out for some kind of touch, just to know if he was even real.

"I'm just glad to finally speak to you again," Spottedpath admitted, her heart still fluttering uneasily in her chest. "I– I don't have much time, but after this is all over, you have some serious explaining to do." She offered up a weak but lighthearted chuckle at the end of her sentence, though she was as serious as ever.

Hawkscar gave a hearty laugh in response, the nostalgic sound yanking Spottedpath right back to her apprenticeship with him. "Oh, don't I know it—I can only imagine what they said about me in BlazeClan."

"It's more . . . what they didn't say," Spottedpath laughed softly, thinking of the vague words the BlazeClan cats had spoken of Hawkscar. Her old mentor gave her an amused look and let out another laugh, his voice reaching into the forest around them.

"I know that you came here for advice," Hawkscar murmured to her after a few moments, "and I'm sorry to say that I have none to offer—frankly, I wasn't even sure I'd be able to catch you before you woke. Before you go, though, I just . . . wanted to say that I'm proud of you, Spottedpath. You couldn't have turned into a better warrior."

Once again, Spottedpath found herself losing her words. She thought that seeing Hawkscar for the first time since he had died would be the biggest surprise of the night, but the fact that he was *proud* of her shook her even more. Everything that had happened since her escape weighed endlessly on her shoulders. If Spottedpath was being honest with herself, she never imagined Hawkscar would be proud of her actions. *All I've done is live in fear and listen to old dead cats,* she thought sadly and cast her gaze to the ground briefly.

"Hey, I know that look," Hawkscar mewed sternly this time. He sat upright and gave Spottedpath a serious look. "I mean it. You were born to be great, and look at you—I know that you won't rest until this forest is safe. You're going to accomplish more in the first few moons of being a warrior than I ever did. You've already come so far."

"You're wrong," Spottedpath murmured and stepped forward, brushing Hawkscar's muzzle with her own affectionately. "I don't know your entire story, but Hawkscar, after seeing how the Clans live, I know that *you* were my family—you changed my life, and for that I'll be grateful until the end of time. Judging by what the cats in BlazeClan said, you've done a great deal for them, too."

Hawkscar fixed Spottedpath with another of his famous, kindhearted gazes. Wordlessly, he leaned forward, touching his nose to Spottedpath's. The silent action spoke a million words to Spottedpath, and she closed her eyes slowly, embracing the temporary happiness that her mentor granted her.

Soon, she heard the babbling of water—the soothing noises of the Starfalls—and she felt the starry mist whirling around her crouching body. Spottedpath opened her eyes slowly and stared at the pool before her without moving a muscle. *I will see you again,* she thought, and realized she had never before felt more certain

about anything.

Rustling to the left side of the pool caught Spottedpath's attention. Hesitantly, she sat up and cast her gaze toward the culprit. When she did, she saw Muddapple rummaging restlessly through the leaves that had piled up at the edge of the water. His golden eyes held a disappointed sheen, and his brows furrowed as if he were deep in thought. The expression said all anyone needed to know—that his dreams in search for advice were fruitless. Spottedpath stepped forward and opened her mouth to call to him, but he noticed her movement immediately and spoke first.

"What did you see?" Muddapple asked, his tone uncharacteristically hopeful. Spottedpath only stared at him for a few heartbeats, not sure how she wanted to respond. While she hadn't received any advice for the upcoming war, she had gotten her emotions thrown back and forth in a nearly nauseating dance.

"Let's go," she finally said. "We can't miss the rescue mission—*I* can't miss it." Muddapple shot Spottedpath a look of confusion and concern, but he said nothing as they began to pad away from the Starfalls. *What good would telling him do?* Spottedpath wondered to herself. *Seeing Frozenleaf didn't help us at all—neither did Hawkscar, as happy as I was to speak to him again. If StarClan won't give us advice, then we'll continue to take charge.* As they headed back toward the NightClan camp, Spottedpath felt a twinge of guilt as she recalled her outburst to Shadestar, and found herself hoping they weren't withholding advice because of her.

Chapter 29

Spottedpath sat anxiously with Mirepelt and Greythorn as Nightstream repeated the plan they had devised for their mission. It felt as though an unspoken fear hung in the air—the fear that they would fail this, and that everyone involved would be killed. It was such a daunting possibility that they didn't even have to acknowledge it.

"So, according to our plan, we go together as far as the Gathering Stones. Once we're there, Mirepelt and Greythorn will remain in the hedges at Tallrock to keep a lookout for patrols. Deadeye has been sending patrols into the newly stolen territory, so we have to be careful. Spottedpath and I will move ahead to retrieve the kits from the camp." Nightstream's voice carried nothing but confidence, and Spottedpath couldn't help the admiration she felt for the grey molly.

"Why her?" Greythorn asked with a nod in Spottedpath's direction, though her tone was curious more than it was suspicious.

Nightstream hesitated for a moment. She sent a glance in Spottedpath's direction, who gave her a soft nod, before responding. "Spottedpath was born in the Gorge, just like me. Plenty of us would recognize her, but some would turn a blind eye or even mistake her for her father from a distance. Deadeye has recently gotten tangled up with some rogues—none of us know where they came from, or how many more there are, but they won't recognize Spottedpath. She knows how to hide from anyone else."

"Greythorn and I would just stand out," Mirepelt concluded slowly, looking thoughtful. "That makes sense. We've never even seen the camp, so we could draw attention to ourselves by being clumsy."

With a final, decisive nod to one another, the four of them took off into the night. Nightstream led them through the territories as the moon slowly rose into the sky; though clouds threatened to

cover it, it had barely moved since Muddapple and Spottedpath had returned from the Starfalls. Likewise, Spottedpath's mind hadn't rid itself of the thought of Hawkscar. Seeing her mentor had saddened her, but in a soothing kind of way.

As they raced through the forest, the four of them merely shadows in the night, white specks of snow began to fall from the sky. It was the first time Spottedpath had ever seen snow, and under different circumstances, she might have been enthralled by the mystical, fluffy flecks. She hardly paid attention to it, however, as she caught scent of a Gorge patrol just as they approached the Gathering Stones.

Spottedpath exchanged a dark glance with her three companions and together they ducked into the hedges that bordered the clearing. While the other three stayed as far away as possible, Spottedpath crept to the very edge of the undergrowth and peered around the branches.

"I'm just saying this is a terrible time to have kits!" Redflight spoke, his tail twitching in agitation. "Days after Thornheart moves into the nursery, Deadeye brings some cutthroat rogues into our camp?"

". . . You do remember that we've kidnapped the children of the Clans, right?" Fernspring murmured after a moment. The tone she took nearly broke Spottedpath's heart—she'd never heard her sister sound so distraught.

"I never said I was okay with that, either," Redflight muttered quickly. "And I trust Thornheart to look after them, but . . . I don't know."

"I didn't raise you to be so soft," Rocksplash spat at him. She was visibly furious with Redflight's conflicted feelings, but at the end of her sentence, Spottedpath swore she heard the molly's voice falter. She perked her ears and craned her head forward, desperate to hear their interaction more clearly.

"His concerns are valid, Rocksplash," Coldstep muttered. For once, she sounded unsure of herself—much unlike her brothers,

Frostheart and Snowface. "Ever since Hawkscar's death, things have felt off within the camp, and now we have strangers living in our home? Welcomed there by our own leader?"

"If you don't like it, you can always leave," Rockplash retorted angrily, though Spottedpath could see her ears flattened through the branches. *None of them seem to trust in Deadeye anymore,* she thought, astonished at the change of heart.

"And go *where?"* Fernspring spoke up again, her fluffy ginger tail quivering. "The Clans would never accept us."

"They accepted Spottedpath . . . ." Redflight mewed pointedly. The voices of the four cats faded as they padded further into SwiftClan territory, leaving Spottedpath wordless.

Mirepelt, Greythorn, and Nightstream came out of their hiding spots without uttering a word. Spottedpath cleared her throat and turned back to them, offering up a determined nod before falling in step and moving to the southern side of the clearing.

"This is where we part ways," Mirepelt spoke up once they could peer into the territory of the Gorge. "We'll be here, hiding in the undergrowth as lookouts for you. If you aren't back by dawn . . . ."

"If we aren't back by dawn, get back to the NightClan camp as fast as possible," Spottedpath ordered, giving the two warriors a dark gaze. "You'd be fools to come after us." Nightstream said nothing, her gaze trained on the trees of the forest they grew up in.

Mirepelt and Greythorn exchanged a worried glance, but eventually they nodded in agreement and sent the younger warriors on their way. Spottedpath and Nightstream quickly did what they had to do to blend in with the shadows of the forest, though it wasn't hard with the clouds still threatening to hide the moon. After a few quiet moments, Spottedpath glanced around and spoke to Nightstream.

"So, who are these rogues, anyways? Should we be watching out for them?"

Nightstream sent her a harsh look that screamed for her friend to be quiet, but she responded anyways, "We only know the names of eight of them so far. Eternity and Eclipse are two sisters who are absolutely inseparable, so they're hard to miss. Bastien is the biggest cat I've ever seen, with a pelt as black as night—he doesn't ever say much and we're all a bit intimidated by him. Then there's Lucienne. She's a really pretty silver tabby with a strange accent, and she seems nice so far."

Nightstream paused as if she were trying to remember the rest of their names. Spottedpath flicked an ear awkwardly when she felt a surge of jealousy over the compliments toward this Lucienne cat. *Get a hold of yourself,* she told herself crossly. *What a ridiculous feeling.*

"Oh, and Tangle! Trust me, you'll know him when you see him. There's Hecate, who doesn't talk much, but she has these massive paws and these eyes that are always . . . searching. Aldric is a white tom with silver tabby markings on his paws, tail, and face—so far, he seems . . . normal? Finally, there's Ace. We think he's their leader, because he does most of the talking and is charming in the same way Deadeye *tries* to be. Like I said earlier, you shouldn't have to watch for them—they wouldn't know the difference between you and Greyheart with those . . . um . . . ." Nightstream's eyes wandered to the scars that littered Spottedpath's pelt before she guiltily looked away.

Spottedpath forced a weak chuckle and glanced over her shoulder. "Ironic, isn't it?" she mewed softly. "Looking so much like him yet striving for something so different."

Nightstream gave a soft hum in response, and the rest of the trip was made in silence. Once they got to the camp, however, Spottedpath noticed something odd. There seemed to be a flickering light emanating from *inside* the cave. She knew it was new to Nightstream, too, with how she hesitated at the sight.

"It wasn't like this earlier," she whispered before leading Spottedpath into the cave.

Together, the two she-cats entered the cave. They were greeted

with celebratory yowls and overwhelming commotion. Spottedpath froze when she saw the source of the light; in the middle of the cave, atop some broken up branches, was a flickering fire. Instead of rearing away from it, however, the cats in the camp peered at it curious. Excited murmurs spread among the cats that gathered, and as Spottedpath looked around, she saw many unfamiliar cats.

Two mollies sat side by side, their pelts brushing together as they spoke in hushed voices—one was a dark tortoiseshell with a ring of bright orange speckles on her face, and the other was a very dark ginger tabby with a white stripe down the middle of her intense orange eyes. *Those must be the sisters,* Spottedpath thought curiously, *and I bet* that *is Lucienne.* Her gaze drifted to a spotted silver tabby, noticing how the molly's long, wispy tail bounced distractedly as Finclaw tried to strike up a conversation.

Not far away from them was a fawn-colored tom with long, luxuriously curly fur. Beside him was a chocolate-and-white tom with striking green eyes. *That's* got *to be Tangle, and I bet the one with him is Ace.* Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and glanced to the right of them when she saw a hint of movement. In the shadows sat a dark bluish-grey tabby, her large paws tucked neatly beneath her and her eyes fixated on the fire in the middle of the cave. Spottedpath realized it was Hecate; her gaze was just as intense and intimidating as Nightstream had said, and it left Spottedpath feeling unsettled.

Suddenly, Spottedpath realized that Deadeye was speaking from atop the Smoothstone. Below him rested a massive black-furred tom with white spots on his eyelids, and a smaller white tom with silver-point tabby markings. *Bastien and Aldric,* Spottedpath thought with a nod to herself.

"Our time has nearly come, my friends," Deadeye yowled, pulling Spottedpath out of her thoughts. "We have the Clans, and that wretched Spottedpath, right where we want them. Soon we'll squash them like the annoying pests they are!" Spottedpath flinched when triumphant howls erupted from the cats in the clearing.

"Come on," Nightstream hissed urgently before giving Spottedpath a harsh nudge. Spottedpath turned to follow her, trying

not to notice the terrified expression that had made its way onto Nightstream's face.

The two mollies lurked quietly along the edge of the clearing, passing the den that Spottedpath knew as the nursery and nearing an old, vacant den near the Smoothstone. *He must have moved it when they stole the kits,* Spottedpath realized, her ears perking curiously. Silently they entered the den, squinting in the darkness until they could make out the figure of Thornheart, her tail curled around the five stolen kits of SwiftClan and BlazeClan.

"Spottedpath?" Thornheart hissed in surprise, curling her tail more tightly around the sleeping kits. "Nightstream, what have you done?"

Spottedpath glanced to her friend and saw her eyes narrow. For the first time since they'd known each other, Spottedpath noticed anger swimming in the depths of her amber eyes. To her surprise, Nightstream remained silent, so Spottedpath turned to Thornheart and spoke.

"I'm here for the kits, Thornheart," she muttered, locking her gaze to the brown tabby molly's. "Don't try to stop me."

"I could raise my voice and you'd be killed in an instant," Thornheart responded plainly, though she kept her voice low.

"You could," Spottedpath mewed slowly, eyeing Thornheart carefully. "But I know you won't."

"Who are you to stop me?" Thornheart snapped. Spottedpath peered at her and noticed a hint of uncertainty deep inside her amber eyes. *She shares the feelings of the others,* she realized; it was something she knew she could use in her favor.

"What would Jaggedthorn say if she saw what you've become?" Spottedpath questioned after digging into her memories for ammunition. "I might have been younger when she died, but anyone could see how close you two were. She was like a mother to you, wasn't she?"

"Don't you dare speak of her," Thornheart growled quietly, her eyes narrowing. The tone she took confirmed Spottedpath's suspicion, and she knew that she'd struck a nerve.

"What would she say if she knew you killed Brownpaw?" Spottedpath took a steady step forward as she spoke.

Thornheart's eyes widened in shock, and her gazed bounced warily to Nightstream. "How do you—"

"You don't need to hurt any more families, Thornheart," Spottedpath murmured softly, letting her tone soften. "You could even raise yours in a safer environment. You know, if you wanted to." When she finished speaking, Spottedpath nodded to the ever-so-slightly rounded belly of the brown tabby molly.

"Are you saying . . . ." Thornheart trailed off, the uncertainty in her eyes replaced by a glimmer of hope.

"If you help us rescue these kits, and vow to never hurt another cat unless it's in self defense, the Clans might allow you to live under their protection," Spottedpath confirmed with a nod. Next to her, Nightstream's jaw dropped at the offer. Spottedpath sent her a meaningful glance and rested her tail lightly against her friend's flank, hoping Nightstream would hold her tongue. Nightstream responded by giving Spottedpath a harsh glance, though she said nothing.

After a few moments of consideration, Thornheart met Spottedpath's gaze. "Okay, fine. I'll help you," she declared before stirring the kits sleeping at her belly. "Wake up, little ones—and stay very quiet."

"Isn't that Spottedpaw?" Mousekit, one of Spiderclaw's kits, mewed sleepily. The dark brown she-kit rushed up to the warrior, her black tail sticking straight up in surprise.

"It's Spottedpath, now," the golden tabby purred quietly, ignoring her surprise at the BlazeClan kit's boldness. Suddenly, Spottedpath got an idea. "Now, I've got a mission for you all—can you handle that?"

The kits met Spottedpath with eager nods, all five of them now wide awake. Aspenkit stepped forward hesitantly, her silver and white fur quivering with excitement. "A mission!" she whispered in astonishment.

"We're going to be getting you back to your mothers, but that means we have to sneak around *all* of the cats in the camp. You all have to be very, very quiet. One tiny little peep could jeopardize the whole mission. Can I count on you?"

All five of the kits nodded in unison, their mouths shut tightly as they tried to remain quiet. Spottedpath glanced from Nightstream to Thornheart before stepping forward and picking up Bristlekit by the scruff. The grey-and-white spotted she-kit dangled limply, though her eyes were wide with anticipation.

Nightstream stepped forward and picked up Aspenkit, looking a bit unsure of herself, while Thornheart picked up Palekit delicately. Mousekit and Bramblekit watched them, and when Spottedpath saw them exchange uncertain glances, she stepped toward them.

"Walk behind those two," Spottedpath whispered around Bristlekit's fur, nodding to the other two mollies. "I'll take up the rear and make sure nobody sees us leave, okay?"

The two BlazeClan kits gave determined nods and fell into step as Nightstream and Thornheart led them out of the den. The light from the fire flickered lazily, illuminating the cats in the center of the cave and sending long shadows along the walls. Spottedpath let the other four gain some distance, the shadows concealing them all from sight as they hurried along. Before they were even halfway across the camp, Spottedpath felt a new presence and hesitated; when she looked around, though, she didn't see anyone nearby.

"E-Excuse me." A quiet whisper sounded from behind her, nearly frightening her out of her fur. When Spottedpath turned around, she was faced with a sickly-looking Sunpaw. "You're Spottedpath, right? Frozenleaf said that you can help me get better, but she said I have to follow you. I-Is that okay with you?"

Spottedpath only stared at Sunpaw for a few heartbeats, totally

dumbfounded by her words. *Frozenleaf sent her?* she thought in astonishment. Spottedpath glanced around the cave slowly until she met the icy gaze of the Gorge healer; her pale blue eyes were desperate as she watched Spottedpath.

A grim realization dawned on Spottedpath when she held Frozenleaf's gaze—the realization that Sunpaw needed immediate treatment if she wanted to survive the sickness. Spottedpath brought her gaze back to Deadeye's kit and slowly set down Bristlekit. Then, she leaned forward and nodded to Sunpaw, motioning her forward.

"Don't make a single sound," Spottedpath whispered urgently. "Follow Nightstream, but don't get too close to the kits—we can't risk them getting sick, too."

Sunpaw nodded obediently and weakly trudged ahead of Spottedpath. The dappled golden tabby slowly picked Bristlekit up once again and started padding after the group. *Maybe Frozenleaf really does have good intentions,* she mused, though the thought left her feeling even more troubled. *Things seem so different here—Deadeye must have really fallen apart.*

Spottedpath followed the edges of the cave carefully, careful not to trip over loose pebbles or cast any shadows on the walls. The cats gathered around the fire didn't notice her as they hooted and hollered triumphantly. Up ahead, Spottedpath noticed that Nightstream and Thornheart had paused near the exit, and when she looked closer she felt her heart sink.

Mudwing and Ironheart had noticed the mollies and approached them, and she could see them speaking to each other. Spottedpath craned her head forward, trying to hear their whispers, though it was no use—they were being far too quiet. As she tried to listen, she failed to notice the scuffling of a cat growing nearer until it was almost too late.

Spottedpath felt panic grow when an unfamiliar scent washed over her suddenly. She glanced around and spotted a wall of stalagmite rising out of the floor of the cave. Without a second thought, Spottedpath took Bristlekit and ducked behind the wall of

stone, out of sight of the nearing stranger. She set the kit down carefully and, after a moment of sheer terror, peeked over the top of the stalagmite.

The tom that Spottedpath learned was named Aldric had approached her spot, and he was sniffing around suspiciously, his silver-tinged ears perked to pick up the slightest sound. Spottedpath immediately ducked back into hiding and met the terrified gaze of Bristlekit. She shook her head urgently at the kit, willing her to remain silent.

Just when she thought Aldric had found them, Spottedpath heard some cat break out in a fit of coughing—the sound came from behind them, though her hiding place concealed them from her sight. She heard shuffling and, when she peeked out of their hiding spot once more, Spottedpath saw that Aldric had turned away from them to inspect the noise. Then she saw that Frogtooth sat on the opposite side of the rogue tom. The blind, scar-covered molly was hacking violently, though when Spottedpath looked more closely she saw no physical signs of illness. *Is she faking it?* she wondered. *She looks perfectly healthy—her eyes aren't even glossy!*

The coughing attracted attention from across the clearing. The more Spottedpath watched, the more she noticed the peculiar behavior of Frogtooth. The molly was flicking her tail in Spottedpath's direction, and then in the direction of the entrance of the cave. *What in the world is she doing?* Spottedpath wondered, absolutely bewildered.

"Stand back!" Frozenleaf ordered Aldric as she rushed into sight. Spottedpath tilted her head as she inspected Frogtooth, and then turned to the silver-point tabby. "This is bad—very bad. You were close to her, Aldric, you might be infected too!"

As Aldric gave the two Gorge cats a suspicious but worried look, Spottedpath noticed Frozenleaf flicked her ears in the golden tabby's direction. *It's a distraction!* she realized suddenly, feeling stupid for how long it took her. *Neither of them wanted to kidnap these kits!* Quickly, Spottedpath spun around and picked up Bristlekit before swiftly sneaking along the very edges of the cave.

As she crept away, she noticed that Nightstream and the others had finally made it out of the cave. At least, she'd hoped as much—certainly if Mudwing and Ironheart had reported them, there'd be much more commotion. With a final glance behind her, Spottedpath hurried out of the cave and up the ledge that led into the forest. Once on safer, more stable land, she realized that both Mudwing and Ironheart had joined the cats that waited for her.

"We want to help the Clans," Mudwing burst out before Spottedpath could question them. "Hawkscar was all I had here—he was the one highlight of my life. You're all I have left of him, Spottedpath. Let us help."

Ironheart nodded in agreement. "Nightstream's siblings are warriors too; Rabbitflight can handle himself, and I can't handle another moment of watching Pearlstep's behavior worsen." Spottedpath could only stare at them wordlessly for a few moments, feeling her heart twist in her chest for the two warriors.

"Fine," Spottedpath mewed around Bristlekit's fur. "Each of you carry a kit, and move quickly."

The older warriors did as they were instructed without a moment of hesitation, and then the group turned into shadows in the night. They set off at a swift pace, using the undergrowth to hide them and their shadows, though they barely needed it. The gentle snow had turned into an icy sleet that pelted against the group of cats with more force than Spottedpath could have imagined—luckily, the wind came from the direction of the Gorge camp, so it didn't hinder their traveling much. Even so, it froze her to the core; she could only imagine how the poor kits felt.

As they neared the Gathering Stones, Spottedpath picked up a trace of a faint scent on the wind. She slowed her pace a bit as she identified the scent, and waited a moment to make sure her imagination wasn't playing tricks on her.

"Mouse-dung," she cursed quietly before setting Bristlekit down. "One of the bigger kits needs to run so someone can carry Bristlekit—and you need to be fast."

"What?" Nightstream asked around the fur of the kit she carried. "Spottedpath, what—"

"Just go—*now,"* Spottedpath interrupted her quickly and gave them all a meaningful glance. "I'll catch up to you, but you all need to hurry before he gets here."

The four warriors in front of her exchanged worried looks before listening to her orders. Mudwing set down Bramblekit to pick up Bristlekit, who's eyes were wide with fright. Nightstream stepped forward and gave Spottedpath a final nod before leading the escapees into the night. When they were out of sight, Spottedpath turned and sat patiently, the freezing rain suddenly the least of her worries. *If he wants to stop me, he'll have to actually beat me, first.*

Moments later, Dustleap appeared out of the undergrowth. Spottedpath met his gaze and noted that he looked unusually distressed—his fur was disheveled and his amber eyes held a faraway look.

"I knew it," he panted breathlessly. "I knew it was you. Did you really think you'd get out of there without getting caught?"

"Stop this, Dustleap," Spottedpath warned him, ignoring his question entirely. "You know that this is wrong."

"Oh, but it's so right," Dustleap retorted angrily. "The Clans have wronged Deadeye for too many seasons—and *you* have wronged me far too many times."

"What did I do to wrong you?" Spottedpath demanded, feeling herself grow angry with her brother. "All I did was exist. Was it how Hawkscar treated me, or how Rocksplash treated you? I never asked for any of that. I wanted us to be *normal* siblings, Dustleap."

"Don't play dumb," Dustleap spat and took a step forward. "You've sought to destroy us from the beginning." Spottedpath narrowed her eyes at that, realizing where he was getting these ideas from.

"Deadeye's feeding you lies, and you're eating them up, just like

a fool," Spottedpath growled quietly, digging her claws into the wet earth below her. "You killed our brother, for StarClan's sake!"

"S-Shut up," Dustleap snapped, his gaze softening as his voice faltered. "He deserved it."

"No, he didn't," Spottedpath countered, trying to hold his gaze and keep her tone even. She hadn't talked about her brother's death since it happened, and this wasn't how she wanted to remember him. "Riverdash never did a thing to hurt you, Dustleap—he loved you. He was our *brother* and you *murdered* him."

"You're wrong!" Agitation laced Dustleap's voice as he leaped at Spottedpath. She dodged the attack far too easily and felt something nagging in her mind about his desperate stance. *I can't fight him when he's like this,* she told herself. *This is just unfair to him. I need to reason with him somehow.*

"Dustleap, please listen," Spottedpath pleaded desperately while he recovered from the missed attack. "Can't you see that Deadeye is manipulating you? All he cares about is destroying the Clans, even if it means taking the entire forest down with him."

Dustleap flung himself at her again, cursing loudly when Spottedpath avoided the attack once more. He turned and swung his paw at her, but he didn't even graze her fur as she ducked away from it. Spottedpath could see his eyes glittering in the night as he grew conflicted with himself, and she told herself she wouldn't return any of his attacks.

"Deadeye only wants justice," Dustleap muttered, though to Spottedpath it sounded like he was only trying to convince himself. She knew her words had taken root in his mind, so she pressed further.

"No. He wants chaos and misery for everyone around him. That's who he is, Dustleap. Don't you remember what happened when we were apprentices? He threatened to *kill* me for showing a bit of fear —I have the scars to prove it." Spottedpath lifted her head a bit, knowing it was just enough for Dustleap to see the old scars Deadeye had left on her, along with the recovering wounds from

her fight with Frostheart.

Dustleap faltered his attack when he saw the scars, and he slipped on the slick grass beneath them. The brown tom fell onto the ground with a loud *thud* and remained unmoving, his eyes closed. Spottedpath hesitated as she watched him, unable to decide if it was a trick to get her guard down.

"Get out of here, Spottedpath," Dustleap growled, startling her. "Next time I catch you on this territory, you won't make it out alive."

Spottedpath blinked in surprise but didn't hesitate. She took off into the forest, heading straight toward the Gathering clearing. Just outside the hedges sat Nightstream, her tail flicking worriedly. She leaped to her paws when she saw Spottedpath, relief written across her face.

"I sent the others ahead with the kits," she explained quickly. "I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm fine, but we can't linger any longer," Spottedpath muttered quickly. "We have to go in case Dustleap sends someone after us."

"Dustleap? You let him go?"

"There was something off about him, Nightstream. He couldn't land a single attack; I think I finally got through to him," Spottedpath glanced back into the forest warily. "Come on, please. Let's catch up to the others."

The mollies shared a final glance and pelted into the night, following the scent trail of the other cats. Spottedpath found herself hoping the leaders would accept the other cats that had joined their rescue mission—they needed the safety that the Clans offered them. Just as they neared the NightClan camp, they caught up to their companions; Greythorn led them with Bramblekit in her jaws, and Mirepelt followed a short distance behind them.

"We're here!" Nightstream called out breathlessly, moving with Spottedpath to the front of the group.

They all stopped outside of the camp entrance and shared a worried glance—even Greythorn seemed worried. *This is it,* Spottedpath told herself, a pit forming inside her stomach. *Better to get this over with instead of waiting and worrying about the result.* With a confident nod to the others, she made her way into the camp with them.

"They're back!" someone called out when they appeared inside the clearing. Immediately the cats of SwiftClan and NightClan filed out of their dens, ears perked and eyes wide. Juniperstorm and Cottontuft rushed forward and took their kits, leading them out of the freezing rain. Fishstar and Harestar pushed their way through the now-massive crowd, their eyes resting distrustfully on the strangers that had joined the mission.

"Who are they?" Harestar demanded, her eyes not straying from the four newcomers.

"They wanted to help us," Spottedpath explained quickly, bowing her head to the leader. "Thornheart is expecting kits; she doesn't want them raised there. Sunpaw is dangerously sick and needs immediate medical attention, too."

"And you really think that they wanted to help? That this wasn't all some big trick to them?"

"I know these cats," Spottedpath raised her head and kept her tone level. "I wouldn't have brought them here if I thought they meant any harm to us, Harestar."

"If Spottedpath believes in them, then so do I," Fishstar spoke up from beside the NightClan leader. His pelt, like everyone else's, was slicked back by the rain, and he looked even skinnier than usual.

"Very well," Harestar gave in with a deep sigh. "Greythorn, get the sick apprentice to the medicine den immediately. The rest of you, state your names."

"Thornheart."

"Mudwing."

"Ironheart," Ironheart mewed after the other warriors. All three of them lowered their heads to Harestar, visibly intimidated by her harsh gaze.

"Ironheart?" Spottedpath blinked in surprise as Longstep rushed out of the crowd to greet the ginger she-cat. "Oh, StarClan, it's so good to see you."

Spottedpath felt Nightstream stiffen beside her, but neither of them said a word as the three Gorge warriors were welcomed by the others. Mirepelt had already disappeared into the midst of the crowd, and Greythorn had long since vanished with Sunpaw. The throng of cats quickly became overwhelming for Spottedpath, so she tapped Nightstream's shoulder with her tail and trudged through the rain to find shelter beneath a large, overhanging root. Nightstream followed her and rested next to her quietly, both of them watching the cheery crowd of cats let out cries of celebration in the freezing cold rain.

Chapter 30

Spottedpath padded across the NightClan camp clearing, her pawsteps leading her straight to the medicine den. Once she reached it, she found herself hesitating; the warrior wasn't sure what drove her here in the first place, or if her presence would be welcome. The overhanging root cast a threatening shadow in the evening sun, and if she hadn't come with such a certain purpose, Spottedpath would have used it as an excuse to leave. With a final, decisive nod to herself, Spottedpath pushed past the curtain of lichen that hung from the entryway and entered the den.

Inside, the air smelled of sickness, and it made worry well up inside the golden warrior. She quickly pushed it aside though. *For how few sunrises have passed since their rescue, Sunpaw's condition has vastly improved,* she reminded herself firmly. *Tigerflight even said that she may be able to leave the den unsupervised soon, if the progress keeps up.* Once she reassured herself, Spottedpath remembered why she came to the den in the first place.

"Hi, Sunpaw," she mewed quietly when she located the sick apprentice. "How are you feeling today?"

Sunpaw sat upright in the makeshift nest Tigerflight had made for her, her dark tortoiseshell fur much less matted than the days before. "I feel much better today!" she chirped cheerily before breaking off into a tiny cough. "I'm grateful for all the help I've gotten from Tigerflight, Muddapple, and Brightpelt."

"That's great to hear," Spottedpath purred, sitting a small distance from the molly. She didn't care if she got sick, but she'd hate to spread it to the rest of the Clans. "Have any of the others visited you?"

"No, only you," Sunpaw mewed without skipping a beat. While her tone stayed as cheery as ever, Spottedpath felt a bit of pity for her. Silently, she scorned the other Gorge refugees for not visiting their campmate before speaking again.

"I'll make sure to pester Mudwing or Nightstream into stopping by, then," she purred jokingly. When Sunpaw let out a soft mixture of a cough and a laugh, she flicked her ears anxiously. "None of the medicine cats have been too rough with you, have they? I know they sometimes become rather callous with their work."

Sunpaw shook her head quickly. "Oh, goodness, no! They've all been very gentle with me, and sometimes they even stop to talk and spend time with me. They told me that they miss seeing Frozenleaf at the Starfalls, too." Spottedpath blinked in surprise at that, but didn't feel comfortable pressing for information on the subject. She heard someone calling for her from the clearing—even worse, it sounded like Brackenclaw. Considering the SwiftClan deputy was a cat that nobody wanted to keep waiting, Spottedpath dipped her head to Sunpaw in a farewell.

"Duty calls," she joked apologetically with a wave of her tail toward the clearing. "I'll be sure to poke my head in here again once I'm free, okay?"

"Sure!" Sunpaw chirped before stifling another weak cough. "Thanks, Spottedpath!"

With a final nod to the sick apprentice, Spottedpath turned and exited the medicine den. She quickly spotted Brackenclaw near the entrance of the camp and bounded to him without wasting a heartbeat; the broad-shouldered deputy was the last cat she'd ever want to cross.

Before Spottedpath had a chance to ask him why he called for her, Brackenclaw spoke, his eyes narrowed and his critical gaze trained on the younger warrior. "Despite my own objections to it, Fishstar wants you to be among the warriors he takes to the emergency Gathering—we'll be leaving shortly. Along with myself, you'll be accompanying Hollyheart, Muddapple, and Cottontuft, and *no,* attendance isn't optional."

Spottedpath bit her tongue to restrain herself from making any snide remarks to Brackenclaw's attitude toward her. Instead, she nodded her head obediently and turned away, searching for any of her friends. When she spotted Nightstream, she rushed to the pretty

molly, letting out a sigh of annoyance when she was out of the deputy's earshot.

"Is that ugly brute giving you trouble?" Nightstream asked teasingly, surprising Spottedpath.

"Who, Brackenclaw?" she queried quickly. "No, he's always been like that. Fishstar chose me to attend the emergency Gathering, and I'm sure Brackenclaw just thinks a more experienced warrior should have been chosen. I can't say I blame him, really."

"You're probably wiser than half of these old crows already," Nightstream retorted affectionately, causing Spottedpath's ears to heat up in embarrassment. Nightstream's gaze suddenly shifted to something further away, and when Spottedpath turned to follow her gaze, she noticed Ironheart sitting with Longstep. The ginger she-cat looked happier than Spottedpath ever remembered her being.

"I've noticed it too," Spottedpath murmured softly and let her gaze travel back to Nightstream as she sat down. "Are you worried about your mother? She seems happy."

Nightstream shifted uncomfortably and dropped her gaze. "It's not that I'm worried," she started hesitantly as guilt flashed across her eyes. "It's just . . . I don't know."

"I won't pretend to understand," Spottedpsth murmured slowly, resting her tail across Nightstream's. Suddenly, she remembered Longstep's interest in who she'd assumed was Ironheart when she first joined SwiftClan. "Maybe he's—"

"Spottedpath, it's time," Fishstar called from the entrance of the camp. Both he and Harestar had collected their warriors while she'd been distracted with Nightstream. With an apologetic nod to her friend, Spottedpath hurried over to them, silently noting all of the cats who were attending the emergency Gathering. Along with Brackenclaw, Muddapple, Cottontuft, Hollyheart, and of course herself, she noticed Tigerflight, Petalheart, Lionpelt, Greythorn, Honeyheart, and Clovernose. *They're all who I'd assume are Harestar's most trusted,* Spottedpath told herself with a nod.

Without a word, the group of cats quickly filed through the camp entrance and through the thickly-forested territory. Spottedpath kept a steady pace with them, noticing how the trees sent long shadows along the pine needles that layered the forest floor. It didn't take them long to reach the Gathering clearing, but when they got there, they all gathered in a small alcove behind the Tallrock. There was no sign of the cats of RushClan or BlazeClan yet, so Fishstar and Harestar each sent one warrior to patrol within the hedges of the clearing.

Shortly after, Spottedpath picked up the scents of the missing two Clans. The arid scent of the BlazeClan cats mixed with the river-tinged RushClan scents, and soon, they appeared out of the shrubbery to greet the others. Spottedpath rose to her paws to greet them, and counted the cats she was able to recognize; from BlazeClan, she saw Yellowheart, Skyfeather, Jayleaf, Swallowclaw, and Talonstrike alongside Heatherstar. The black-furred leader looked particularly agitated, her bluish eyes wide with anger. She didn't recognize most of the RushClan cats—there was a pale yellow tabby next to Kinkstar that she assumed was the deputy, Bumbleflight, and next to *him* was the medicine cat that Spottedpath recognized as Moonlight. The rest of the cats though—a blue-grey tom with darker legs, a ginger tabby molly, and a darker grey tom with scruffy neck fur—were complete strangers to her.

As everyone quickly fell into place behind the Tallrock, Spottedpath found her way to Jayleaf and Swallowclaw. Once she reached them, she dipped her head in a greeting, only to be surprised when both warriors pulled her in with their forelegs for a brief embrace.

"Hey, Spottedpaw!" Jayleaf purred affectionately before adopting a more serious tone. "It's good to see you again, but it's a shame it had to be under these conditions."

"I actually got my warrior name, it's Spottedpath now," Spottedpath explained quickly, though her eyes remained trained on the four leaders; they held their heads together as they spoke in hushed tones. "Are you two okay? I heard that the Gorge hit BlazeClan pretty hard. I've never seen Heatherstar so distressed,

either."

"We're okay," Swallowclaw spoke up this time, though his eyes seemed guarded. When Spottedpath took a closer look, she noticed that her friends were unusually tense. "Congratulations on earning your warrior name. Are *you* okay? The Gorge attacking SwiftClan could not have been good for you."

Spottedpath hesitated as she tried not to recall the battle at the SwiftClan camp. "I'm okay," she murmured after a moment and found herself hoping they didn't notice her fresh scars. "Oh, Swallowclaw, I um . . . I saw Hawkscar again, in StarClan, and he seemed . . . really happy, actually. I thought you should know."

Both Swallowclaw and Jayleaf blinked in surprise at her words. "I'm glad he made it to the lands of endless hunting," Swallowclaw mewed after a moment, a flash of happiness appearing in his gaze. To her relief, neither of them made a move to question how exactly she saw him.

Harestar cleared her throat deliberately, quieting the whispers that had spread throughout what few cats had joined them. Every warrior, deputy, and medicine cat turned their heads to face the four leaders. Each and every face held the same grim expressions, matching their leaders'.

"Deadeye launched an attack when we least expected it. One of our newest warriors, Fernwillow, was murdered. Our kits were kidnapped, and many of our warriors were gravely wounded," Fishstar started to speak slowly when none of the other leaders stepped forward. *I nearly died, and you lost a life,* Spottedpath thought as she remembered her own wounds from the battle. She didn't fail to notice how he kept his voice low, and let his gaze flit nervously back and forth, as if watching for an unseen enemy.

"Did he lose a life? He seems . . . off." she heard Jayleaf whisper aloud. Spottedpath cringed inwardly and heard her BlazeClan friend grunt when Swallowclaw gave him a harsh nudge. She knew it wasn't Jayleaf's fault—Fishstar's visible restlessness was all too telling about what had truly happened.

"However," Fishstar carried on as if he hadn't heard Jayleaf, "thanks to some of our warriors, namely the young Spottedpath, and a new addition seeking refuge from the Gorge, we swiftly rescued all five kits."

As if on cue, Bramblekit and Mousekit rushed out from behind Hollyheart. The two kits barreled toward Heatherstar, who turned her furious gaze on them.

"Auntie Heather!" Mousekit mewled happily as she ran straight into the fiery-eyed molly. Spottedpath blinked in surprise—even though she hadn't stayed with the BlazeClan cats for long, she'd quickly learned the family ties of most cats before she left. Even so, she never got the impression that Heatherstar was related to Spiderclaw or the kits.

Heatherstar's furious gaze softened as the kits huddled against her. "I thought I had prepared my Clan for an attack, but I was wrong. They launched their attack in the middle of a naming ceremony for our newest warriors, Canyonheart and Echobreeze. My sister, Spiderclaw, was gravely injured when trying to defend her kits. I thank StarClan that survived with only a scar to show it."

When Heatherstar paused, an uneasy air fell over the clearing. Spottedpath found herself holding her breath, preparing herself for some grave news. She didn't know what it could be—she knew one of the medicine cats had been injured, but the grave expression that had made its way onto Heatherstar's face suggested there was something far worse than another injury.

"Unfortunately, one of our medicine cats wasn't so lucky. Blueheart insisted on saving as many herbs as possible, and when he went back for a particularly rare bundle, he was attacked. This morning, he died from his wounds."

Spottedpath felt a shock tear through her body, and she resisted the urge to leap to her paws in anger. *When I find out which of them killed Blueheart, I don't even know what I'll do,* she thought furiously. Out of the corner of her eye, Spottedpath saw Jayleaf shift awkwardly in his spot. When she glanced at him she realized both he and Swallowclaw were watching her in apprehension, and she

forced herself to calm down.

Among the leaders, Heatherstar's gaze dropped. "Somehow, the rest of the injuries were minor in comparison. Something needs to be done. The actions against SwiftClan and BlazeClan were atrocious, and Deadeye *must* accept the consequences of his actions at last."

"That won't be easy," Spottedpath found her voice acting on its own. She took a tiny pawstep forward, not even realizing her own actions as they happened.

"Did you *ask* to make an announcement?" Brackenclaw immediately spoke up from his spot near Fishstar. His eyes grew fiery with anger, and his tone was so painfully condescending that Spottedpath nearly flinched away from his words.

"Let her speak." Both Fishstar and Heatherstar spoke in unison. The two leaders had almost entirely discarded their previous stances and were now watching Spottedpath intently. Next to them, Kinkstar had a confused look resting on his scruffy face, while a look of realization had made its way onto Harestar's.

Spottedpath awkwardly sucked in a breath of air through her teeth and spoke. "When Nightstream and I were rescuing the stolen kits, we found out that Deadeye has started to recruit some rogues. There are only eight staying at the Gorge camp, but Nightstream said they think there's more—more than any of us could count."

"Rogues? From the Twolegplace east of the territories? I've been there once, many seasons ago. It's crawling with strays and rogues," Kinkstar spoke up for the first time, looking worried.

"That's not all," Spottedpath spoke again. She hesitated, not sure how to word what she was about to say. "Don't ask me how they've done it, because I can't even begin to understand myself, but somehow the rogues have taught Deadeye how to make fire. During the rescue mission, I saw that they had piled a bunch of sticks right in the middle of the cave, and they were burning. Nobody was afraid of it."

An ominous feeling settled over the group, and Harestar shifted her weight uneasily. "That's absurd," she mewed slowly.

"No, it's maniacal, and it aligns perfectly with Deadeye's actions." Heatherstar's interest had immediately sapped away, only to be replaced once more by fury. "He could burn the entire forest down, even at the start of leafbare."

"I don't think anyone would let him do that," Spottedpath chose her words carefully, hoping to calm the BlazeClan leader.

"What do you mean?" Fishstar asked curiously.

"Think about it. Four cats joined us during the rescue mission, all seeking refuge from Deadeye. When I was sneaking out with Bristlekit, I nearly got caught, but an elder created a distraction, and the healer went along with it, all so that I could get out." Spottedpath remembered the night clearly, and how terrified she'd been of getting caught. "On the way there, we had to hide from a passing patrol, and I overheard their conversation. Every single one of them sounded so conflicted of what Deadeye's been ordering them to do—what they've been *raised* to do. None of them want to lose their home, they just want the justice that Deadeye has manipulated them into seeking."

"Being raised to do the things they've done doesn't make it right," Heatherstar growled after a moment.

"I never said it did." Spottedpath held the leader's gaze with an unflinching confidence. "If we can somehow manage to reason with the cats of the Gorge—not Deadeye—we can survive without unnecessarily shedding blood."

Heatherstar returned the confident gaze, though hers was still mixed with anger. "Bah," she spat furiously, "they can't be reasoned with! They're—" Suddenly, she broke off, but a flash of hatred showed itself on her face.

"What are they?" Spottedpath snapped suddenly. She knew exactly what Heatherstar had been about to say, and she *knew* it was only in the heat of the moment, but it still infuriated her. "Are

they *savages,* Heatherstar? Do you forget who I am? Are you so— so *blinded* by this rage you've manifested that you refuse to listen to reason?"

The space behind the Tallrock fell silent once more. Heatherstar's furious expression was replaced by one of guilt while the other three leaders looked shocked at Spottedpath's sudden cold words. Even Brackenclaw's glare of contempt had been replaced with a look of surprise.

"Okay, fine." Heatherstar's suddenly quiet tone demanded all attention. "Suppose these cats could change the tides of the battle that's undeniably drawing nearer with each passing heartbeat. How do you propose we talk to them? Should we just waltz into their camp and ask for a moment of their time?"

It was Spottedpath's turn to fall silent. She stared blankly at Heatherstar as she tried her best to think of some kind of plan.

"This entire idea is preposterous," Brackenclaw spoke up with a low, yet somewhat nervous laugh. "Trying to reason with those cats is like facing death head-on."

"Death?" Spottedpath echoed quietly as an idea dawned on her. "I've got it! When Muddapple went to Starfalls for advice, I tried to dream with StarClan as well—"

"You *what?"* Moonlight's voice sounded from her spot with the medicine cats. "You're just a warrior, that's silly."

"—and, while I didn't get advice from StarClan, I met Deadeye's healer, Frozenleaf. To this day, she tries to speak with StarClan, and every time I think she ends up in this secluded clearing. If I can just go to Starfalls—"

"Even if that works, we don't have time for these silly stargazing games," Kinkstar interjected casually. For the first time, Spottedpath noticed just how skinny he'd become. Next to the RushClan leader, Bumbleflight looked utterly shocked at his words. "I'm well aware my time as leader is nearing an end, and StarClan forbid I let my old age stop me from protecting this forest with my fellow leaders.

We will fight for this land, and we must do it soon."

Spottedpath shut her mouth at his words. *What am I even supposed to say to that?* she thought as frustration filled her from her eartips to her tail. The other leaders glanced uneasily at one another, as though trying to come up with a single answer everyone could agree on. At the front of the crowd, Petalheart raised her tail hesitantly.

"I say we give Spottedpath's idea a shot," she murmured, and though her quiet voice was confident, her green eyes glittered with uncertainty. "One or two cats visiting Starfalls isn't going to put a dent in our preparations for war. We're four Clans, I mean, come on."

"She's right," Hollyheart spoke up, rising to her paws. Beside her, Cottontuft rose as well.

"Yeah, we're four Clans! How will we be slowed down by a visit to Starfalls?" he mewed confidently.

Murmurs of agreement rose from the few cats in the group. When Spottedpath glanced around, she saw that even the unfamiliar RushClan warriors agreed with the NightClan deputy. Before Kinkstar could object, Fishstar stepped forward, fixing Spottedpath with a warm gaze.

"It's settled, then." He swept his tail around, as if to tell the others he was finished here. "I'll send Spottedpath to Starfalls with a medicine cat once more, and maybe they can make some kind of headway with her idea. While they're taking care of that, the rest of us should be preparing for an all-out war with the cats of the Gorge and however many rogues they've recruited. They might very well outnumber us, so we must be careful."

This time, the murmurs of agreement were firm-sounding. Each leader cast a calling glance to their own warriors, and they all rose to their paws to return to the two camps they currently occupied. Spottedpath murmured a brief farewell to Swallowclaw and Jayleaf before turning to follow her own Clanmates into the forest. Right as she was about to vanish into the undergrowth behind Cottontuft,

she saw Brackenclaw call Fishstar back quietly.

"I'd like a word with you, sir," he spoke in a hushed tone, though Spottedpath managed to pick up each word. "It'll only take a moment."

Everyone else had disappeared into the forest ahead of them. Spottedpath hesitated where she stood and dared a glance behind her, and when she did, she caught Brackenclaw's gaze. He narrowed his eyes at her briefly, an action that sent shivers down Spottedpath's spine before she rushed to catch up with her Clanmates.

She walked at the rear of the group, keeping quiet, even when the other cats made comments to her about how the emergency Gathering had gone.

"I could have never spoken to a leader like that!" Cottontuft whispered to her, his eyes drifting to Harestar. "That was intense!"

"I agree," Clovernose whispered as she fell into step with them. Her sleek black-and-white fur rippled as she walked through the forest. "I could never speak to Harestar so confidently!"

Spottedpath could only offer up an awkward, lopsided smile at their words. Lionpelt slowly fell back to them and turned his head to look over his thick-furred shoulder, an amused glint in his eyes.

"That's why you two will never become leaders," he mewed jokingly. "I might not be leader material, but I know when I see it. Spottedpath here has potential!"

The three warriors started chattering together, each of them catching up to the others as they did so. Soon enough they had arrived at the camp, and Spottedpath quickly grew worried over the absence of Brackenclaw and Fishstar. *He said it would be quick,* she fretted to herself, subconsciously pacing on her front paws. *Why haven't they caught up yet?* When she glanced around, she could tell by the warriors' lighthearted expressions that they paid no mind to the delay in the SwiftClan cats' return. However, Spottedpath noticed Harestar watching the treeline intently, and immediately

knew that the NightClan leader was just as worried as she was.

After a few heartbeats of waiting, Harestar motioned for the warriors to enter the camp ahead of her. Spottedpath held her breath and moved to follow the silent order, and right when she did, she heard a violent rustling come from the undergrowth behind her. Moments later, Brackenclaw burst into view carrying Fishstar's limp body, his green eyes wild.

"What in the name of StarClan happened?" Harestar instantly demanded. All of the other warriors had turned around, and several let out shrieks and gasps of surprise. Meanwhile, Spottedpath found herself inspecting Brackenclaw's pelt. *There's no blood on his fur,* she thought suspiciously before quickly scolding herself. *I shouldn't even be worried about that. Fishstar is dead!*

"It was those mangy Gorge cats," Brackenclaw spat angrily after carefully resting Fishstar's body on the ground. "They waited for everyone to leave and jumped us. I tried to help, but they overpowered me."

Brackenclaw's body trembled with, presumably, rage as he spoke. Harestar quickly and wordlessly ushered everyone into the NightClan camp, and Brackenclaw picked up Fishstar's body once again to carry it into the camp. Once inside, Harestar watched, still speechless, as Brackenclaw rested Fishstar in the center of the camp. Cats immediately filed out of their dens; those from SwiftClan let out anguished cries while the NightClan cats watched quietly. Spottedpath slowly padded toward Fishstar's body, the shock of his sudden death finally sinking in.

"It's just like I told you," Brackenclaw growled as he rounded on Spottedpath. "Reasoning with those savages is pointless. They've murdered our leader in cold blood!" The young warrior found herself flinching back from him, the suddenness of his aggression taking her by surprise.

Instead of responding, Spottedpath crouched next to the dead leader's body and lowered her head in mourning. As if following her cue, the other cat of SwiftClan surrounded the body and one by one they crouched nearby. Spottedpath closed her eyes, letting the

shock and dismay consume her for a few moments. *We can't handle an aggressive leader like Brackenclaw right now,* she told herself. Despite previously blaming her concerns on how traumatized she'd become by the past few moons, something about Brackenclaw still didn't sit right with her.

Chapter 31

Many sunrises had passed since Fishstar's death, and the warriors of SwiftClan were still trying to recover from it while adjusting to the leadership of Brackenstar. Naturally, Harestar had sent a messenger to the RushClan camp to spread the news of Fishstar's death—when they had returned, they announced that both Heatherstar and Kinkstar had taken the news harshly, and both leaders were now vigorously preparing for war.

Spottedpath let out the softest of sighs as she let her mind process the events of the last several days. There was a patchy layer of snow on the ground, and her breath billowed in front of her like a puff of smoke. Brackenstar had forbidden her and the SwiftClan medicine cats from traveling to Starfalls, much to their dismay. Ever since he returned from receiving his nine lives, he'd kept a close eye on Spottedpath,

Now, he held a small Clan meeting in the middle of the NightClan camp, and Spottedpath sat quietly with Mouseberry and Mosspuddle. Brackenstar had declared it to be a meeting for warriors only, and requested further that only SwiftClan warriors gather for it. Even so, most of the NightClan cats lingered at the far edges of the crowd for this meeting, many pretending not to listen to Brackenstar's echoing voice.

Next to him sat Birchtail, the cat he had chosen as his deputy. The golden tabby molly looked somewhat uncomfortable sitting next to Brackenstar, her amber eyes glittering as she avoided the gazes of her Clanmates. Spottedpath didn't know which was more concerning—the fact that their new deputy didn't seem at all comfortable with her role, or the fact that Brackenstar had fallen so easily into a commanding leadership.

"The attack on Fishstar was clearly the Gorge getting revenge for the rescue of our kits," Brackenstar spoke steadily, but Spottedpath could hear an unsettling anger hidden in his tone. "A mission we so carelessly launched." Even with the hint of fury in his voice, the

leader was calmer than he had been in the passing moons.

"What'll we do about it?" Mosspuddle's timid voice rose from her spot near Spottedpath and her brother. There was a sadness sewn into her soft tone that made Spottedpath wince inwardly, though her eyes never strayed from their leader.

"Nothing."

Surprised murmurs erupted from the SwiftClan cats immediately. Spottedpath stayed silent and glanced around slowly. Near the medicine den, she noticed all three medicine cats were whispering among themselves, and that their ears were angled toward the gathered warriors.

On the other side of the clearing, beneath the two large boulders that stayed propped against the massive tree trunk, Harestar sat with her eyes trained on Brackenstar. Spottedpath took a closer look, trying to pinpoint anything that might give her a clue to what the NightClan leader thought of this. Unsurprisingly, Harestar kept her emotions guarded.

"What do you mean, *nothing?"* Mirepelt spoke up this time. Skepticism laced his voice, and he stared daringly up at Brackenstar.

"I mean exactly that," Brackenstar responded coolly. "We're going to go back to our camp, in *our* territory. We'll rebuild our walls and pretend that none of this ever happened."

Slowly, mutters of agreement rose from the SwiftClan cats. Spottedpath reeled in surprise at the willingness of them all. *We're possibly days away from a war, and they want to go right back to where our lives fell apart?* she thought incredulously. *I can't stand for this.* Without a word, Spottedpath rose to her paws and took a few steps forward.

"That's a death sentence," she growled, directly meeting Brackenstar's surprised gaze.

"Pardon me?" he sputtered and shifted on his paws.

"You heard me. If we—" Brackenstar narrowed his eyes as Spottedpath continued, and once again she caught a glimpse of fiery hatred in his green gaze.

"Just because you got away with talking to Fishstar and Heatherstar like this does not mean I will continue to allow it. Know your place." Suddenly, each and every word dripped with the same contempt he often showed when addressing Spottedpath.

Spottedpath flattened her ears and took another step forward. "Your idea is insane! Going back to our camp right now is like going headfirst into a fox's den. You'd be killing us all, and you know it."

The stances of the cats around Spottedpath seemed to shift as she spoke out against their new leader. Tension crackled in the air like electricity, Spottedpath didn't care—she wouldn't stand idly by for such ridiculous decisions.

"She's right!" Longstep called out from his spot next to Ironheart, at the very edges of the crowd. "He'd be handing us all over to Deadeye!"

"We don't stand a chance against him as it is," Hazelberry agreed, with Mirepelt nodding next to her.

"Spottedpath raises solid criticisms, Brackenstar," Hollyheart mewed from the front of the crowd. At her defiance, the rest of the Clan seemed to rise up with her.

"I'm your leader now," Brackenstar spat angrily, causing the front row of warriors to shrink away from him. "My word is law, and if you don't like it, there's nothing keeping you here." The calls of defiance seemed to simmer down to uneasy murmurs at that, but Spottedpath wouldn't let herself back down.

"If you insist on leading us to our deaths, at least let Juniperstorm and the kits remain in the shelter of NightClan until this is over," Spottedpath proposed confidently. "Them, and the Gorge warriors who came seeking refuge. It would be cruel to blatantly put them back in the path of danger."

Brackenstar fell silent and held Spottedpath's stare. As intimidating as his fiery green eyes were, Spottedpath refused to let go of his gaze. The dark brown tom was visibly angry—his muscles were taut and his claws were unsheathed, digging into the earth beneath him. *Is he about to attack me?* Spottedpath wondered, suddenly regretting her decision to speak against him.

With a quick glance around, she noticed that a larger crowd had formed on the outskirts of the clearing. The medicine cats had ceased their whispering, and now all three of them had their gazes trained on Brackenstar and Spottedpath. Even the kits and their mother had crept into the clearing to witness the argument, while all of the NightClan and Gorge cats watched the event unfold, their whiskers twitching in anticipation. Judging by the way Brackenstar's own gaze flitted around the clearing before locking back onto Spottedpath's, he had noticed it, as well.

"Fine," he growled slowly as he relaxed his stance. "Those who wish to remain under NightClan's protection may do so, for now. My stance on your visit to Starfalls does not change, however."

Spottedpath let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. The rest of the clearing seemed to follow suit, and every cat in sight visibly relaxed. Beside her, Mouseberry let out a relieved sigh and muttered something playfully under his breath—Spottedpath could barely pick out what it was, but she was certain it was something about her tendency to confront the Clan leaders so casually. She moved to nudge him affectionately, laughing quietly as she did so.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting something—" Harestar cleared her throat deliberately and stepped forward. "—but I've deployed a few cats who excel at the art of stealth. They've been spying on the passing Gorge patrols within SwiftClan territory, and one returned with news of an attack. Deadeye is preparing to move no later than tomorrow, and we must prepare immediately. If we move at sunrise, we can intercept them before they enter our territory."

Instantly, the warriors of NightClan moved to prepare for war, and Harestar swiftly sent a messenger to RushClan to deliver the news. Spottedpath moved to help, but hesitated when she caught Harestar's gaze. The leader blinked knowingly at her before turning

to Brackenstar once more.

"However, Brackenstar, I'll request that as payment for the . . . indefinite shelter of your warriors, you and all of SwiftClan will remain here until this war is over—to help NightClan, of course. StarClan knows we all need each other, and the more paws we have to help with preparations, the better."

Brackenstar begrudgingly agreed to Harestar's request with incomprehensible mutters, and Spottedpath found herself feeling grateful toward the NightClan leader, though she kept it to herself. If Brackenstar had managed to take *any* of their Clanmates back to their camp, she had no doubt that Deadeye would have attacked again without leaving survivors.

Around Spottedpath, the cats of the two Clans had started to move urgently. Without needing a single order, Spottedpath and the other SwiftClan warriors dispersed into the crowd to help with the battle preparations. She saw the medicine cats lining bundles of herbs up just outside the den, while warriors diligently reinforced the walls of the camp in case the fighting made its way there. By the warriors' den, Spottedpath noticed that some of the Clan warriors were training with the Gorge warriors—rather, they were being trained by them—and moved to join them.

"In the Gorge, we're trained to take advantage of our opponents weaknesses—sometimes even turning their own strengths against them," Nightstream's voice rang out clearly as Spottedpath approached them. "It's vital that you never let them see what you're thinking, and to *never* take your eyes off them." The warriors in front of her nodded obediently at her words, each of them trying to emulate the training with one another.

"Be careful to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, and attack when they least expect it," Mudwing chimed in. For the first time Spottedpath noticed how tiny he looked next to Nightstream's long-legged physique.

Once she got within earshot, Spottedpath added, "Don't forget that some of these cats might not be entirely willing to fight us. Several of us have seen it for ourselves—the fact that three of them

are here training you is proof enough. If any of them seem conflicted, use that to your advantage—the more we convince them to turn on Deadeye, the more likely we are to win."

When she approached, everyone paused to listen to her instructions. The attention made Spottedpath feel mildly uncomfortable, but when she caught the affectionate glance Nightstream sent her, her troubles melted away. Before Spottedpath could continue helping them with the training, she heard Muddapple call to her from the medicine den.

"Spottedpath, a moment, please!"

"Coming!" she called back. Spottedpath gave Nightstream a nod before rushing off to see what the medicine cat needed from her.

"I know we were told not to go to Starfalls," Muddapple murmured quietly once the warrior was close enough, "but do you think you could dream yourself into StarClan like you did before?"

Spottedpath shifted on her paws and sent an uneasy glance in Brackenstar's direction. "I don't know about that. I thought he was going to attack me earlier, right in front of everyone, and I still have a bad feeling about . . . ." She remembered how Mouseberry had mentioned Muddapple's lineage and trailed off awkwardly.

"About what happened to Fishstar?" Muddapple finished the sentence for her without missing a beat. "I know. The other medicine cats and I share your feelings. Besides, if he gets upset at you for dreaming yourself into StarClan, we don't let him punish you for it."

Even though Muddapple's golden gaze was reassuring, Spottedpath still felt uneasy. *If he gets angry and realizes he can't do anything to me directly, he might take it out on others,* she told herself. She sent her gaze toward the leader again and felt her ears heat up when she met his intent stare.

"Spottedpath, enough hanging around the medicine cats," Brackenstar called to her. His fur was slightly disheveled, and he still looked angry from her defiance during the Clan meeting. "We

need your help."

Spottedpath shuddered under his glare and gave Muddapple an apologetic glance. "Looks like he won't be letting me out of his sight anytime soon. I better go be useful."

Without waiting for another response from the medicine cat, Spottedpath whisked around and headed to the nearest familiar face she could find—Mouseberry. He sat alone at the edge of the clearing, and it looked like he was struggling to weave extra brambles into the camp walls.

"Need some help?" Spottedpath murmured as she sat next to him.

"Yeaaah," Mouseberry started and drew out his response sheepishly. "Turns out, reinforcing the walls is something the NightClan cats are better at. You know . . . with the whole . . . *weaving* thing . . . ." Spottedpath held back a chuckle and rose to her paws again.

"Why don't we help with the other preparations, then? I know Harestar has sent the swiftest to gather materials, and they've been dropping them just within the camp entrance. We can help sort them," Spottedpath suggested nonchalantly. When Mouseberry didn't respond, she added with a mirthful tone, "Or we could keep trying to weave brambles into the camp walls when we have no idea what we're doing. You know, whichever works."

"Okay, okay, let's take care of the mess by the entrance," Mouseberry laughed and ran off ahead of her, but not before nudging her shoulder playfully. Spottedpath chuckled and trotted after him, picking up a mouthful of moss from the messy mass that had accumulated.

Together, the two warriors made trips to the medicine den to neatly organize the bundles of moss in small stacks. Spottedpath could feel small clumps of moss sticking to her fur, but it didn't bother her as much as the taste of grass and earth that came with it. *The gatherers were certainly speedy in their collections,* she thought with a cringe. Mouseberry hardly seemed to notice it; when

Spottedpath glanced at him, she realized he had an amused expression resting on his face. Before she could ask him what he was grinning about, he shot her a sideways glance and spoke.

"So, you and Nightstream?" Mouseberry let out a murmur, muffled by the bundle of moss in his jaws. Even though he was trying to be laid-back in the current situation, Spottedpath could see he was worrying about the upcoming battle just as much as everyone else.

"Mouseberry, I don't know if we should talk about that right now," she murmured quietly, keeping her mind from straying to thoughts of her pretty friend.

"What else are we going to talk about?" Mouseberry retorted quickly. "Our impending doom? C'mon, Spot."

"Spot?" Spottedpath echoed, unable to keep the amusement from her voice. She let out a quiet sigh as she thought of Nightstream, but insisted on working quietly with Mouseberry. Together, they finished transporting and organizing the bundles of moss, and then swiftly took a pile of brambles to the camp walls to try to weave them into place once more.

"Soooo?" Mouseberry urged her once they had figured out how to properly form a wall with the materials.

"It's none of your business, Mouseberry," Spottedpath tried to force an annoyed growl into her voice, but she knew it had come out as affectionate. Mouseberry perked his ears at her tone and nudged her with his shoulder.

"You totally like her!"

Spottedpath bristled defensively and opened her mouth to offer up a retort. "N-No, that's ridiculous!" *Some defense that was,* she scolded herself immediately as she burnt up with embarrassment.

"Spottedpath likes who?" Nightstream butted in as she approached the pair of cats. There was a hint of something in her voice that Spottedpath couldn't quite distinguish—it was like an

intense curiosity. On the other side of her, Mouseberry had silenced himself with poorly-contained laughter.

"N-Nobody," Spottedpath muttered quickly, feeling her ears heat up with embarrassment. "Are you done giving the Clan warriors lessons?" Mouseberry's fur brushed against her as he trembled from the effort of choking his laughter down. Spottedpath had half a mind to knock some manners into her friend, but Nightstream's interruption had flustered her far too much for her to act on it.

"Mudwing and Ironheart took over, and Longstep said he'd help them a bit. Plus, I just . . . need some time to process everything, and being around you makes it easier."

"Process everything?" Spottedpath choked out, trying to ignore how Nightstream's voice made her heart flutter. She was silently grateful that Mouseberry had finally contained his laughter, and was once again poorly weaving brambles into the camp wall.

"Well, when you were gone, Ironheart came forward and told me that . . . uh . . . Longstep is my father. I don't really know how to feel about it, you know?" Nightstream let out a troubled sigh and snagged a bramble vine on her claw before weaving it into the wall.

"Wait, we're cousins?" Mouseberry interjected, surprise and excitement radiating from him. "That's awesome!"

Spottedpath stared at the bramble wall in front of her as she thought, and realized she wasn't entirely surprised from the revelation. "You don't have to feel any kind of way about it, if you don't want to."

"Well, I kind of . . . don't mind it. It was a little obvious, too, with how close they've been. He seems very nice, and it seems like he makes Ironheart happy, so I mean . . . ." Nightstream trailed off with a thoughtful shrug. "Anyways, Mouseberry, you're my . . . cousin?" When Nightstream's tone grew unsure as she used the term, Spottedpath felt amusement bubble up inside her and remembered how foreign the familial terms had felt to her at first. Of course, it had been acknowledged in the Gorge, but they rarely

addressed their families more than formally.

"Yeah!" Mouseberry chirped quickly. "My dad, Ploverfern, is Longstep's brother! Isn't that cool?" Spottedpath held in a sigh of relief at Mouseberry's immediate acceptance of his uncle's relationship. When other warriors spoke of half-Clan relations, their words were usually full of contempt.

"Yeah, I guess it is kind of neat," Nightstream mumbled quietly, as if her mind was elsewhere.

Spottedpath stayed silent as the two of them chatted together. Occasionally, they'd move to another section of the camp to reinforce that side, or they'd move to transport fresh bundles of moss and cobwebs to the medicine den. A few times, Mouseberry would send a knowing glance in Spottedpath's direction before asking Nightstream about her love life. Each time, Spottedpath's ears grew hot with embarrassment.

"What? What do you mean?" Nightstream would respond in flustered mumbles every time, her ears twitching awkwardly.

Spottedpath only spoke up when they addressed her—she was happy to simply be in the presence of two of her best friends, and was grateful for the distractions they provided against the battle they'd be charging into come the next sunrise.

Chapter 32

Spottedpath clawed impatiently at the earth beneath her, ignoring how the pine needles poked at the pads of her paws. The warriors of both SwiftClan and NightClan, along with the three warriors that had left the Gorge, clustered near the main entrance to the NightClan camp. At the front of the crowd, Spottedpath saw Brackenstar standing with his tail lashing. The brown-furred tom looked distracted, but at the same time eager to get into the forest.

Next to him, Harestar sat facing the cats of the two Clans. Her eyes glittered with anticipation, but even so, her expression was steely and intimidating. Her muscles rippled under her pelt as she flexed her forelegs impatiently, and Spottedpath realized how scary she'd be to face in a battle. A little further from the crowd sat the deputies, Petalheart and Birchtail. Birchtail still looked uncomfortable and shy, going so far as to shrink down when Petalheart stepped forward to make an announcement.

"This is the war that decides our fate!" the grey-and-white she-cat called out. "Remember your training, and fight well, fellow warriors! Deadeye's reign of terror ends today!"

Spottedpath reared onto her hindlegs with the cats around her, letting out a fierce battle cry that was drowned out in the yowling of her Clanmates. With a single, unified movement, they all rushed forward and burst into the forest. Leading the charge were the two leaders, heads held high as they raced through the forest. Spottedpath found herself in the middle of the crowd. On one side, Mouseberry raced with his tail streaming behind him; Nightstream pelted alongside Spottedpath's other flank.

The warriors' muscles rippled underneath their pelts, and their paws thundered against the cold forest floor. The early morning frost stung Spottedpath's paws with each step, and her breaths billowed out in plumes of misty frost that got whisked away as soon as it appeared.

Harestar led them to the RushClan border first, almost immediately the river-bound cats and the BlazeClan cats appeared out of the undergrowth. Spottedpath couldn't help noticing that Heatherstar led the forces for both Clans with Bumbleflight and Yellowheart close on her tail. Kinkstar ran in step behind his own deputy, looking strained as he struggled to keep up the pace. The four leaders only exchanged a grim glance before they veered on their paths, leading all four Clans to the Gathering Stones.

As they quickly neared the sacred gathering spot, Spottedpath realized how ironic it was that the leaders chose to meet Deadeye's forces there. Instead of meeting under the peace of the truce, they were meeting for a war that decided the fate of the Clans—the entire forest.

"We're going to fight like the Great Clans once did," Mouseberry whispered as they entered the clearing. "We'll put this battle down in the history of our Clans forever."

Once inside, the warriors pressed close together and shifted to the center of the Gathering clearing while they awaited Deadeye's arrival. Each and every cat waited on bated breath, their eyes scanning the edges of the clearing carefully. The air grew thick with tension and anticipation, and Spottedpath swore she could hear it crackling in the air, like the calm before a storm.

The snap of a twig far out of sight caused them all to tense up, and Spottedpath struggled to breathe as everyone squeezed more tightly together. Straight across from them, the bushes rustled, and Deadeye slowly started to slink into sight. Close behind him were Greyheart, Snowface, Ace, Aldric, and Clawtail. As soon as they were in plain sight, Spottedpath noticed countless sets of eyes peering at them through the hedges, and with a painful gulp she realized that they had let themselves become surrounded at the base of the Gathering Stones.

"How unfortunate," Deadeye called to them, his voice taunting. "You've all chosen to follow a heretic to your collective doom. We could have been so great together, too." Spottedpath shuddered at his words and felt her friends press closer against her.

"We'll fight with StarClan at our backs, Deadeye," Heatherstar growled, and stepped forward with fury-filled eyes.

Deadeye met her gaze and let out a snicker. "Is this about Spiderclaw, dearest Heatherstar? I assure you, if she survived that, she would have been better off dead. The events that follow this battle will be crueler than anything you could imagine, or will ever live to see."

Spottedpath flinched when Heatherstar let out a snarl and moved to storm forward. Yellowheart quickly moved in front of her and whispered something into her ear.

"StarClan never forgave Crowstar, and they will never forget this, Deadeye," Kinkstar spoke up as he moved to stand at Heatherstar's side.

"StarClan, StarClan, StarClan," Deadeye mocked, and Spottedpath thought she detected a hint of anger in his tone. "Is that all you fools are worried about? Your silly stories of dead cats?"

They're not stories, they're real, and he knows it, Spottedpath thought, feeling a sudden surge of anger toward his words. Suddenly, she remembered the dream she had of the Great Rift. *It's almost like history is trying to repeat itself—but I won't let it end up the same way.*

"You'll pay for your crimes, Deadeye," Harestar commanded and stepped forward, just like the two leaders before her. She was the most collected, and therefore the most intimidating of them all. At the same time, her attitude sent a wave of courage through the Clan warriors, and Spottedpath started bracing herself for the fight.

Deadeye let out a soft but menacing laugh as his gaze trailed to Brackenstar briefly, who Spottedpath noted hadn't spoken up like the other three leaders. Suddenly, Deadeye was serious, his claws digging into the soft earth beneath him. His single eye raked over the Clan cats, hatred glittering deep inside of it, until he met Spottedpath's blue gaze. She shuddered when his hatred was replaced by something far more sinister.

"Kill them all."

At his command, the cats of the Gorge launched themselves out of the hedges along with countless rogues. Almost immediately, Spottedpath becomes lost in the sea of battle, unable to identify her Clanmates or her friends through the throngs of unfamiliar faces. She spun on her paws and tried to weave through the overwhelming masses of rogues. Over the tops of the writhing masses of cats, she spotted Redflight and Finclaw standing together, scanning the clearing as if they were searching for something.

Spottedpath saw an instant opportunity and rushed to them. "Thornheart is safe with us," she spoke quickly when they both prepared to leap at her. "You could be too, if you joined us."

"Thornheart . . . ?" Redflight murmured, standing upright.

"Why should I care?" Finclaw muttered, though Spottedpath could see right through his act. "She left us because she was a coward."

"No, she was smart, Finclaw," Spottedpath retorted, trying to keep her voice level. "Why would your sister want to raise her kits in a place that takes pride in kidnapping others' young?"

"We weren't proud of it," Finclaw mumbled and cast his gaze away, while Redflight looked wounded by Spottedpath's words.

"Deadeye certainly acted like you were." Spottedpath stayed painfully aware of the sounds of battle around her and decided to urge them once more. "Look, if you join us, you'll never have to worry about those things again. Thornheart gets to safely raise her kits, and if you join us, you could be part of that. If you don't, you might never see her again."

Spottedpath waited impatiently as Redflight and Finclaw exchanged a glance, the former's pleading. Then, the two nodded at one another and rushed into the fray. They immediately started working together to drive off rogues one by one, leaving Spottedpath dumbfounded. *That was easier than I expected it to be,* she thought.

Suddenly, she felt an ominous presence and glanced around worriedly. She saw Firthistle and Sandstripe, the newest NightClan warrior, cornered against the base of Tallrock by none other than Greyheart. She crouched and, just as she was about to leap over to help, Kinkstar leaped down from the stones and landed on Greyheart's back. Spottedpath stood frozen as she watched Greyheart easily pull the aged RushClan leader off of his back. The scar-covered golden tabby tom swiftly slammed Kinkstar onto the ground and delivered a killing blow to his throat.

Time seemed to slow down when Greyheart stood up straight and, after making sure Kinkstar wasn't getting up again, turned back to the two warriors he had cornered against Tallrock. Spottedpath noticed how terrified they looked after witnessing her father murder a leader and suddenly she was freed from her own paralyzing fear, leaping forward to fight Greyheart head on.

"Sandstripe, Firthistle, work together to drive off as many rogues as possible," she called out as she ducked under a blow from her father. Spottedpath forced herself to look reassuring as she glanced back at Firthistle. Her BlazeClan friend nodded and led the buff-colored molly back into the fray. Spottedpath spun back around to face Greyheart and swallowed down her own anticipation. She knew there was no reasoning with him, and she also knew that her chances of winning a battle with him were dangerously slim.

Just as Spottedpath prepared to give her all to this fight, a vaguely familiar russet molly fell into step beside her. "I might not have been the greatest mother to you in the past," Foxleap murmured to a shocked Spottedpath. "But is it too late to try again?"

Swallowclaw appeared on her other side, his fur disheveled but a fiery glint within his amber eyes. "I've waited far too long to see *this* flea-bag beaten to a pulp," he growled as he brushed reassuringly against Spottedpath. "Help the others, Spottedpath. We've got this."

Spottedpath forced a nod and backed away in a daze. Swarms of battling cats hid Foxleap and Swallowclaw from her sight, and soon she found herself turning around only to come face to face with

Fernspring and Dustleap. As soon as they saw their sister, they braced themselves for a fight, but Spottedpath stood down. *If I can keep convincing them to help us, that would be enough,* she told herself as she met their gazes.

"Come on, we're siblings," Spottedpath mewed quietly. "I know that this isn't what you want, despite what Deadeye's taught you." Immediately, Fernspring looked troubled, her blue eyes glittering indecisively and her fluffy ginger tail drooping.

"Maybe she's right, Dustleap," Fernspring murmured. "I mean, this all feels so wrong . . . ." Spottedpath bit back a feeling of triumph at how quickly her sister seemed to stand down when she noticed the anger in Dustleap'a stance.

"That's just how she manipulates you," he growled, refusing to meet Spottedpath's gaze. "She tricks you into feeling guilty for things you haven't done—"

"Oh, for the love of StarClan, enough of the victim mentality," Spottedpath snapped suddenly. For a heartbeat, she considered quieting down again, but when she saw the confused look on Fernspring's face she decided against it. "Dustleap, you killed our brother. Never in a million moons could you find a way to justify that."

"You did *what?"* Fernspring whispered, looking distraught. Dustleap flinched away, the anger in his eyes giving way to guilt. Spottedpath stared at him incredulously.

"Of course you didn't tell her," she growled quietly. "You're so predictable, just like a miniature Deadeye. Does Foxleap know what you've done?"

Dustleap only glared at Spottedpath with his jaw clenched tightly. Fernspring gave a disbelieving shake of her head and padded up to Spottedpath. Once she was standing in front of her sister, Fernspring raised her head and gave Spottedpath a determined look.

"I'll convince as many as I can to join the Clans," she whispered

softly. "If they hear it from one of their own, they might be more likely to listen."

Spottedpath nodded and gave Fernspring a gentle nudge as she rushed off into battle. Then, Spottedpath turned to face Dustleap just in time to see him leap at her. She tried to duck away from his outstretched claws, but was several heartbeats too slow; he barreled into her and clawed her flank, drawing blood.

With a hiss of pain, Spottedpath rolled away and sent her force in Dustleap's direction. She ducked away from his claws and, when he paused, took the opportunity to dart forward and knock his hind legs out from under him. Dustleap tumbled to the ground gracelessly, letting out several breathless gasps. Within a heartbeat, Spottedpath was over him, pinning him gently to the ground.

"You can still surrender, Dustleap," she urged him desperately. "If you join us now, I'm certain that anything you've done—anything Deadeye has made you do—the Clans will forgive it. Life doesn't have to be like it has been."

"Don't listen to her." Pearlstep forced her way through the writhing crowds of cats, her piercing green eyes furious. "We'll end them all. We'll control the forest, Dustleap. Just you and me—just like we've talked about."

The pale tabby took a threatening step toward Spottedpath, and as the golden tabby backed away from Dustleap, she noticed how much Pearlstep resembled Longstep. She knew there was some kind of harsh irony in that, but she didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Dustleap, you know what the right choice is," Spottedpath pressed as her brother rose to his paws. "Please. There's still time."

Dustleap glanced between Spottedpath and Pearlstep, looking torn. "Deadeye wants me to take his place, though."

"Deadeye wants you to slaughter countless innocent cats, just like he has," Spottedpath retorted, clawing at the ground beneath her in frustration.

When her brother flinched away from her words, Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and took a step closer. She ignored the hiss from Pearlstep, not noticing how the pale tabby molly copied her movements. Something about Dustleap had caught her attention, and when she looked closer, she noticed that small scars littered his body.

"What he's doing is abusive and wrong, Dustleap," Spottedpath murmured quietly as she realized what could have caused the marks. "You don't have to live that life anymore, I promise."

Right when Dustleap opened his mouth to respond, Pearlstep let out a furious screech and launched herself at Spottedpath, catching her off guard. Spottedpath flinched and screwed her eyes shut, bracing herself for an impact that never came. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Dustleap had stepped in to stop Pearlstep from reaching her.

"Don't . . . don't touch my sister," he muttered, his gaze locked to the ground. "She's right, Pearlstep—we *don't* have to live like this anymore."

"Live like what, Dustleap?" Deadeye creeped out of the crowds, his single amber eye flitting menacingly between the three warriors. Spottedpath shot Dustleap an uneasy glance as she quickly stepped into a defensive stance.

"Y-You can't scare me anymore, Deadeye," Dustleap declared, standing tall and raising his chin to the Gorge leader. Pearlstep fixed him with a disbelieving glare, but she didn't dare stick around to face Deadeye's wrath. She started slinking away, vanishing into the same crowd of cats that Deadeye had appeared out of.

"Oh? Is that why you're trembling like a newborn kit?" Deadeye sneered and took a few calm steps forward. Suddenly he paused and lifted a paw with his claws unsheathed, pretending to inspect them. "Because I like you, Dustleap, I'll give you another chance. You still have potential. Kill Spottedpath, and I might forgive you for these transgressions."

A silence fell over the three cats, despite the ongoing battle

around them. Spottedpath's heart sank when she saw that Dustleap was still struggling to weigh his options. *You can make the right choice, I know it,* she urged him silently. After a few moments he turned to her, his amber eyes glittering apologetically.

"I'm sorry for the things I've done to you, Spottedpath. I wish I had more time to make up for everything, but—" Spottedpath frowned when Dustleap paused, knowing exactly what he was trying to tell her. She dared a glance at Deadeye, and noticed the threatening glint in his eye had briefly been replaced with a look of incredulity.

"I treated you like a son!" he mewed, feigning a wounded expression. Spottedpath narrowed her eyes when she saw that his mocking sneer still threatened to show through.

"You *had* a son, and you let him and his sister die," Dustleap growled with a sideways step toward Spottedpath.

"And you killed your own brother, dear one." Deadeye let go of his facade and gave them both a smirk. "Whether you like it or not, you've become just like me. You're the only one worthy of being my heir."

Dustleap visibly flinched at his words and, before Spottedpath had time to react, launched himself at Deadeye. She called out to him and rushed forward to intervene, but Deadeye spun on his paws and smacked Spottedpath away before turning around to attack Dustleap. She stumbled backwards, tripping into other cats and knocking them apart.

Spottedpath quickly scrambled to her paws and came face to face with Aldric, who was flanked by Bastien and Hecate. The silver-point tabby hardly made an effort as the two larger cats swiped down any that came for him, as though they were there only to protect him. As soon as Bastien saw Spottedpath, he narrowed his green eyes and swung at her. She ducked away from his attack and spun around, shoving her way through the battling cats to return to Dustleap and Deadeye.

She finally got them in her sights just in time to see Deadeye pin

Dustleap down and deliver a killing blow. She froze in her tracks; the sight might as well have been a direct blow to her heart. It felt like she was witnessing every heart-rending death all over again at once. The shock of the incident that seemed to set it all in motion—the dream where she'd seen Crowstar murder Ivorystar. Brownpaw's plummet into the roaring river in the gorge; the death of her own mentor, Hawkscar, in place of her own life. Riverdash's death, caused by their own brother. Fishstar's death, and now her only remaining brother, Dustleap, after she had finally convinced him to free himself of Deadeye's evil ways.

Spottedpath's breathing became labored and her vision blurred—except for the sight of Deadeye, however. She was utterly and completely focused on the cat who had just taken her brother's life. The cruel, snide, one-eyed leader looked proud of his actions. Too proud. Spottedpath felt her veins run white-hot with fury, forged out of the moons of anguish and suffering she had endured because of *him*. With a fierce cry, she launched herself at the cat who had finished tearing her life apart piece by piece only moments beforehand.

Spottedpath flew at Deadeye with her claws outstretched, fully prepared to steal his life just as he had stolen so many others. He was quick, though; he countered almost all of her attacks with near-perfect precision. Spottedpath gave the same effort she was met with, if not more.

Soon enough, Deadeye landed a solid blow to her flank, right over her wound from her fight with Dustleap. *He's dead because of this tyrant,* she reminded herself sourly and narrowed her eyes. Ignoring the searing pain on her side, Spottedpath darted forward and latched onto Deadeye's right shoulder, digging both teeth and claws into his flesh. The one-eyed tom gave a pained hiss and easily grabbed Spottedpath by the scruff of her neck, and then he tore her off of him and sent her sprawling on the ground.

"Give up," he growled and started pacing toward the recovering warrior. "I've been a step ahead of you this entire time—I even knew about that little rescue stunt you pulled."

Spottedpath hesitated when he said that. *How could he have*

known? She was certain Nightstream wanted nothing to do with his manipulative games, and she had grown trustful of Frozenleaf as well. Her shock and confusion must have been evident on her face, because Deadeye gave a snort of laughter and paused on his path.

"You might not be a trained tactician, but I know you're no idiot," he sneered. "You can't tell me you didn't notice his behavior —he wasn't exactly subtle about where *his* allegiance truly lies."

Using his tail, Deadeye pointed to a group of Clan cats that seemed to be crowding around one cat. When she looked more closely, Spottedpath saw that Brackenstar was in the center of the circle fighting Hollyheart. Several of the surrounding cats were their Clanmates from SwiftClan; each and every one of them looked horrified about what was happening in front of them.

"The idiot even killed his own leader because he thought it'd earn him a section of territory after I wipe out you and your pesky Clan cats." Spottedpath snapped her gaze back to Deadeye and narrowed her eyes, earning a smirk from the Gorge leader. "Ah, so you *did* notice, then. I should expect as much from the cat who brought tales of StarClan back into *my* camp. They really must learn that their prophecies mean nothing."

Within an instant, his smirk had turned into a scowl as he ended his words with a snarl. Once more, he began to close the distance he had created between himself and Spottedpath. The golden-furred warrior narrowed her eyes and started circling with him slowly. She noticed that he now walked with the slightest of limps, and had to hold back a triumphant smirk when she realized it was from the wound she'd left on his shoulder.

Deadeye leaped at her with a snarl and they tumbled across the clearing with claws flying viciously. The fresh wounds Spottedpath received hardly stung, drowned out by the panicked determination she felt. *This is for everyone he's killed,* she told herself. *I* must *win this*. Spottedpath swiped her claws relentlessly as they scrambled apart. Deadeye caught her ears several times over and she let out hisses each time, though not in pain. Her anger and desire for justice drove her forward, completely masking the pain of new wounds.

When she saw his eye flicker to her throat, Spottedpath rushed forward only to hit the top of her head against the bottom of his chin, and *hard*. She backed away quickly and prepared to defend herself only to notice that the action had disoriented Deadeye. With an instant decision, Spottedpath seized her chance and lashed her claws across Deadeye's throat.

He crumpled to the ground and Spottedpath backed away, watching him closely. The one-eyed leader twitched violently, and then stilled. *There's no way that was his final life,* she thought as she prepared herself for his awakening. When he didn't move for several moments, Spottedpath started second-guessing herself. Right as she moved to declare their victory, she saw it—the faintest rise and fall of his chest as he started to breathe again.

Spottedpath lunged forward to take another life, knowing she couldn't afford him the time to gain the upper hand. Deadeye was faster, though. He swiped his paw up at her, and with it, he threw the sandy earth from the floor of the clearing right into her eyes. Spottedpath let out a hiss and squinted, trying to blink away the sand. Deadeye's shape was a blur, but she could still see him raise a paw to deliver a fatal blow, and she closed her eyes and braced herself for it.

When the attack never landed, Spottedpath opened her eyes and successfully cleared her vision. In front of her stood Heatherstar with Deadeye's claws planted firmly on her shoulder. *She saved me?* Spottedpath opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She could see that even though it hadn't been a fatal hit, the wound was deep. Even so, Heatherstar hardly seemed to notice.

"Pull it together, Spottedpath," Heatherstar ordered over her shoulder. The leader's rage had dissipated by now, and it was replaced with a comforting air of confidence. "I've not suffered this long just to watch our only hope die before the battle's truly begun."

"Seriously with the sentimentality?" Deadeye let out an irritated groan as he pulled his paw back, and Spottedpath noted that he was visibly agitated now. "Get out of my way, Heatherstar, or else I'll tear every last life from you."

Heatherstar gave a snort of dry amusement and shifted. "That's fine. I've got a traitor to deal with, anyways, and I've got five lives to make sure I take all nine of his." She turned and gave Spottedpath a serious look, as if to say *'I'm with you',* then she turned to where Brackenstar was still fighting a now-wounded Hollyheart. The seal-point molly was flanked by Mirepelt and Hazelberry, who helped her fight the muscular brown tom.

"Now, where were we?" Deadeye snarled as Heatherstar raced off to help. Spottedpath watched his body language carefully; he had lost his limp and walked with a new energy, but something was off. As she kept her eyes on him, she realized it was just like when he had turned his children into apprentices—it was a dangerous edge, but Spottedpath refused to let it intimidate her.

Once more, they flung themselves at one another. Deadeye threw blow after desperate blow at Spottedpath, and she quickly realized what his desperation meant. Deadeye was down to his final life. She narrowed her eyes and returned his blows with twice as much effort. There was a distant burning on her skin from the endless blows Deadeye landed, but it hardly registered in Spottedpath's mind. The only thing on her mind was winning this battle, or at least taking him down with her—for good. For the Clans.

Spottedpath didn't notice as the battling masses of cats broke apart to witness their fight. Deadeye hardly seemed to notice, and if he did, he didn't care. With each blow he landed on Spottedpath, she only grew more determined and driven to defeat him. They unleashed flurries of attacks on each other for what seemed like an eternity, neither noticing the wounds they received in the battle.

Suddenly, Deadeye reeled back with an unsheathed paw raised in preparation for a devastating attack. He left his throat unprotected and Spottedpath saw her own chance. Narrowing her blue eyes, she lunged forward and locked her jaw onto Deadeye's throat. As soon as she tasted the revolting tang of blood, she let go, watching as Deadeye staggered away with his eye widened in shock.

The one-eyed tom quickly fell to the ground and fell limp. He

didn't move again as his blood pooled around him, and Spottedpath knew she had come out victorious. She looked around, finally realizing how every cat—every rogue, every Gorge warrior, every Clan cat—had stilled to watch them. She became acutely aware of the stinging of the wounds that littered her body, but she didn't take any time to inspect how serious they were. She didn't care.

Suffocating the sensation of her wounds was an overwhelming sense of numbness as she looked around and saw bodies littering the floor of the Gathering clearing. She saw Greyheart's body, lying limp and battered a few tail-lengths away from Kinkstar's lifeless form. Morningflower and Fireclaw rested next to one another, their claws still fastened onto one another as if they had fought each other to the death. Brackenstar was now dead, surrounded by the still-shocked SwiftClan warriors and Heatherstar.

And a few small leaps away from Spottedpath was the body of her brother, Dustleap. She wanted to stumble to him and wish him a safe passage to StarClan—she truly believed he had earned it—but her body was stuck in place. In her lower peripheral vision, the sight of something red caught her eye.

Spottedpath looked down and noticed that blood was trickling slowly down her forelegs and pooling at her paws. She blinked in confusion and lifted her gaze again. As she did so, her eyes became unfocused and she felt a chilling feeling creep over her body.

Finally, she broke her legs free and stumbled forward a few paces. Spottedpath thought she heard someone call her name when she moved, but she couldn't tell for sure. Not with the sound of roaring water now deafening her, as if a massive wave had approached to sweep her away to its depths. Her vision faltered, black speckles clouding it momentarily before it cleared up again. She blinked and shook her head, trying to rid herself of the fuzzy feeling and blurred vision. When it didn't work, she looked down at the ground that had started to sway beneath her.

Suddenly, the forest floor was flying closer to her face. She hit the ground without realizing what was happening, and her vision went black. As she embraced the darkness, her body went cold, and all of her other senses faded away completely.

Chapter 33

When Spottedpath opened her eyes, she realized she was in a clearing that smelled of morning dew and stars. *StarClan*. She slowly rose to her paws and saw two familiar starry pelts waiting for her — Ivorystar and Shadestar.

Before she approached them, she glanced around the sunny clearing that she had woken up in. At the far side, she caught sight of Hawkscar talking to none other than Riverdash. Their expressions were serious, but even so, they looked relaxed in the shimmery clearing. *Riverdash made it, then,* she thought happily, and considered calling out to them. *It would be so nice to talk to him again, and Hawkscar, too. I feel like I'll never have enough time in the world to speak to them, though.* Spottedpath nodded to herself and took a pawstep toward her old mentor and brother.

A soft call from Shadestar stopped her before she could make a sound. She turned to the two starry leaders and padded to them slowly as she started putting the pieces together. *I was just at the battle at the Gathering stones — I had won against Deadeye. If I'm here, then . . . .*

"Um . . . am I dead?" Spottedpath looked down at herself and noticed that she didn't have the same starry sheen of the StarClan residents, though her wounds weren't present. Surely, her first day as a StarClan resident would feel more mystical.

The dead leaders exchanged an amused glance at her question. "You did well, little one," Ivorystar murmured and leaned forward, pressing her muzzle to Spottedpath's forehead gently. Then, she sat back and gave Shadestar a meaningful look. Spottedpath glanced between the two of them quizzically, waiting for one of them to answer her question.

Shadestar finally let out a sigh, though he looked hesitant as he began to speak. "I have a favor to ask of you, Spottedpath," he mewed slowly. "Or rather, *they* do." Spottedpath tilted her head

curiously at Shadestar's words, trying to peek around him to see who he meant.

He and Ivorystar moved apart to reveal three familiar young cats sitting together. When Spottedpath looked more closely, she let out a soft gasp. Brownpaw, Blackpaw, and Dapplepaw had found their ways to StarClan and now chattered happily to each other. Once Spottedpath saw them, they looked over from their conversations as if they'd been waiting for her. Shadestar beckoned to Spottedpath with his tail as he and Ivorystar slowly made their way to the deceased apprentices.

"They made it?" Spottedpath whispered with a breath of relief. "Sunpaw and Nightstream will be so happy to hear it. They all look so happy here."

"Spottedpath, I'd like you to grant them their warrior names," Shadestar murmured after a moment, glancing at her over his shoulder.

"Wait, what? Was that a joke, Shadestar?"

"They died before their time," Ivorystar explained quickly, looking exasperated with Shadestar's natural ambiguity. "Deadeye robbed them of their chances, but you can still grant them their wings. They actually asked for you personally, or else we'd have done it ourselves."

Spottedpath stopped in her tracks and glanced between the two ancestors, feeling uncertain. They paused with her and waited patiently for her decision. When she met their gazes and saw that they were nothing but encouraging, Spottedpath realized they were being entirely serious. She let out a sigh and pulled at the grass beneath with her claws.

"Okay, fine, but I have no idea what I'm doing." Despite agreeing, she still felt hesitant.

"That's okay — this isn't exactly a common occurrence, you know. Do whatever feels best, Spottedpath."

Swallowing thickly, Spottedpath nodded before approaching the three apprentices. They watched her curiously, excitement twinkling in their eyes. "I've been asked to grant you your warrior names, but before we start, I know that life under Deadeye's rule wasn't . . . easy. If any of you would like to change your names to be free of the painful memories it left, feel free to speak up." Both of Deadeye's late kits, Blackpaw and Dapplepaw, shook their heads after exchanging thoughtful looks. Brownpaw, on the other hand, stepped forward.

"I actually would like something to . . . help me remember my death," he mewed timidly. "Nothing too cheesy or silly, though — nothing like Bravespirit or Brightshine, please."

Spottedpath hesitated and found herself letting out a nervous chuckle. ". . . Are you sure, Brownpaw? In the Clans you can change your name if desired, but I have a feeling StarClan doesn't work the same way."

"Yes." Brownpaw nodded his head vigorously, his eyes shining with utter certainty. "I want it to be literal, if you don't mind. That way, I can be sure that I'll always remember the ones I loved in life, and the ones who tried to save me. The ones who continue to protect my family." He blinked gratefully at Spottedpath, and she shuffled her paws awkwardly.

"All right, if you're completely certain about this, I'll do it. All three of you line up, and I'll start the ceremony."

The three StarClan residents lined up obediently as Spottedpath recalled the ceremonies she'd witnessed in the Clans. She couldn't remember them word for word, which she decided was acceptable, since she wanted to change the wording a bit anyways.

"I, Spottedpath, warrior of SwiftClan, have been called upon by our ancestors to grant you your full warrior names. Your futures were stolen from you, and I hereby bestow upon you the names you were unable to receive in life. Blackpaw, step forward."

Blackpaw took an excited step forward, and Spottedpath took a deep breath. She closed her eyes briefly as she steadied her voice

and breathing, and silently reminded herself of her words.

"Blackpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Blackflame. StarClan honors your resilience and courage, and they welcome you as a full member of their ranks." She leaned forward and touched her muzzle to Blackflame's forehead, and he licked her shoulder in response. "Dapplepaw, you're next."

The tortoiseshell molly stepped forward quietly. She was much calmer than her black-furred brother, but Spottedpath could see the excitement and anticipation swimming in her amber eyes. She held back a chuckle of amusement and glanced kindly at the apprentice.

"Dapplepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Dapplesplash. StarClan honors your spirit and strength, and they will welcome you as a full member of their ranks." She repeated the movement of placing her muzzle on the starry cat's forehead, and after Dapplesplash licked her shoulder, she turned to Brownpaw.

"I'm ready," he whispered when she sent him a glance. Spottedpath held his gaze for a moment, as if to make sure this was what he wanted. Then, instead of calling him to her, she stepped toward the starry-furred tom and began to speak.

"Brownpaw, from this moment on, you'll be known as Fallensky. StarClan honors your warmth and, above all else, your bravery, and you will forever be welcomed as a full member of their ranks." Fallensky's eyes lit up with delight when Spottedpath uttered his new name, and she held back a purr as she pressed her muzzle to his forehead. When she pulled back, she let her gaze travel over all three cats and lifted her chin proudly. Spottedpath swept her tail to them, motioning for each of them to follow her movement.

"Blackflame, Fallensky, and Dapplesplash, I grant you your warrior names in death to make up for what was robbed of you in life. You may never get to experience a warrior's life in the Clans, but you may carry on in the ancestral territories as fully-fledged warriors. Call your new names into the sky, so that every plant and creature may hear you and accept you as you are."

"Blackflame!"

"Fallensky!"

"Dapplesplash!"

They all cried out their names, rearing on their hind legs as they did so. Spottedpath watched quietly as Fallensky stretched his claws toward the sky, and the other two sprang up slightly. She felt pride well up in her chest as they repeated their cries a few times; it only increased when they stopped abruptly and faced her, their eyes shining gratefully.

"Thank you, Spottedpath," they all chimed in unison. A breeze carried through the trees surrounding the clearing, and the leaves rustled noisily, as if cheering for the new warriors. Blackflame and Dapplesplash rushed off together, but Fallensky hesitated and sent Spottedpath a hopeful glance. Spottedpath caught it and gave him a silent nod. *Of course, I'll tell them,* she promised him silently, feeling happiness for the tom spread through her from her nose to her tail tip.

Fallensky's eyes lit up once again and he raced after the others, tumbling across the ethereal clearing with them. Spottedpath watched them for a few minutes and held back a sigh when she felt the presence of the two ancestral leaders return.

"You never answered my question, you know," she commented with a hint of dry amusement as she turned to face them. Their avoidance of the question filled her with apprehension. They both exchanged yet another amused glance, an action that gave Spottedpath little reassurance.

"You have unfinished work." Shadestar's hazy blue gaze remained trained on Spottedpath.

"W-What? I killed Deadeye—" She broke off as she realized what Shadestar wanted her to do. "Oh. I don't . . . I don't have to be the leader, though, right? I don't feel like I've earned such an important position."

Ivorystar glanced at Shadestar, the amusement gone from their faces. "I'm sure the Clans would approve of you as the MistClan

leader. It would suit you, after you've done so much to correct things."

"I wouldn't, though," Spottedpath murmured quietly. "I haven't even had my own apprentice yet. What if . . . what if we made a new role? Someone to make sure the leader of MistClan doesn't repeat history again?"

"Oh?" Shadestar started at her words, but Ivorystar's face had rested into a gently-proud expression. "A new role?"

Spottedpath scratched at the ground sheepishly. "Yeah. Like . . . an advisor, I guess. I could help the leader with important decisions to ensure it stays within the warrior code while also keeping peace — as much peace as possible, at least. Besides, I . . . I'm not sure I even *want* to be a leader. I want to continue helping my Clanmates with daily duties, and I want to interact with my friends as their equal, not their superior."

"Leaders *are* equal to their warriors," Ivorystar mewed, struggling to stifle a melodic laugh. "Though I don't see why a new role can't be implemented — things change over time. Is that that right, Shadestar?"

"Yes, Ivorystar, they certainly do." Shadestar let out a soft sigh and gave Spottedpath a confident look.

"Are you ready to return, Spottedpath?"

Spottedpath hesitated and let her gaze travel over to the spot where Hawkscar sat with Riverdash. She watched them longingly, and after a few moments, she noticed there were more cats that she recognized in the clearing. She noticed Grassheart and Fernwillow sitting together, looking happy and relaxed. The undergrowth rustled as Fishstar emerged, joining the cats he once led in life. A little ways away from them, she saw Blueheart sitting with Heatherstorm, both of them deeply invested in an idle conversation. Fallensky, Blackflame, and Dapplesplash were still happily playing together, and behind them was the elder Molestrike. Her gaze was fond as she watched them tumble about.

"Would you like a moment, Spottedpath?"

Shadestar's voice startled Spottedpath, and she tore her eyes away from all the cats she recognized. She held Shadestar's gaze for a few moments and considered stopping to greet her old friends.

"No," Spottedpath spoke slowly, not entirely sure of her decision. "No, it's okay. I've got the rest of my life to speak to everyone — I'll visit Starfalls if I have to. I should uh . . . I should probably hurry back, anyways. MistClan won't rebuild itself on its own."

Shadestar suddenly pressed his muzzle to Spottedpath's forehead and gave a sigh. "Thank you so much, Spottedpath. You've allowed me to reconnect with the Clan I've left behind — the Clan I've lost to seasons of treachery."

Spottedpath touched her muzzle to the starry leader's shoulder after giving a nod. "Thank *you* for guiding me along my path, Shadestar. And I'm . . . look, I'm sorry about what I said to you before — "

"No." Shadestar pulled away and gave her a serious look. "It was good that you came to that realization, Spottedpath. On your own, nonetheless. You were right, too; prophecies won't help save the Clans, they can only help guide them along the paths they choose. I should be apologizing for putting so much on the shoulders of such a young cat. Besides, I'll admit the visions I sent might have been a *bit* vague for someone who didn't know the first thing about interpreting dreams."

"A bit?" Spottedpath chuckled and held his gaze for a few moments before looking toward Ivorystar. "Thank you, as well. We haven't interacted as much, but you've still done so much for me, Ivorystar."

"It was all you, Spottedpath," Ivorystar responded smoothly, though she didn't hide her shock at Spottedpath's words. "Remember what I said? It's because of *you* that hope was born. You have the ability to influence the Clans to take great strides, just by existing. A natural gift."

"The hope of the Clans is the only reason I had the strength to win," Spottedpath responded and let out a gentle sigh as she thought about it all. "Er, before I go . . . how will I even rebuild MistClan? I'm only one cat, you know."

"Something tells me that you won't be alone," Ivorystar purred affectionately. "Just as you've brought hope to the future of the Clans, you've impacted the lives of so many cats, young and old."

"Don't force limitations on yourself after you've come so far, either," Shadestar reminded her. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes, as if he knew something she didn't, though this time he didn't show any intentions of giving her a vague vision or mysterious message. "Remember to keep your eyes and your heart open. Every cat in StarClan has their eyes on you now, and you have their full support and belief. I know you can do this."

Spottedpath blinked in surprise at his words and sat back to contemplate them for a few moments. When she decided there truly wasn't some kind of deeper meaning woven into his words, she flicked her tail tip and stood.

"I'll see you two, then," she murmured and lowered her head. "If not in my dreams, then when I finally join the ranks of StarClan. Thank you, for everything."

Spottedpath reached out and touched her nose to each of theirs with her eyes closed. Their scents of caves and stars that Shadestar carried mixed with the warm, comforting scent of Ivorystar, and soon enough, the sensations of StarClan had faded away, leaving Spottedpath in the dark once again.

Chapter 34

When Spottedpath came to once more, she found herself in the darkness of a den that smelled of herbs. A scratching, rustling sound pulled her to full consciousness, and when she opened her eyes, she saw the back of Muddapple from across the den. The brown tabby tom seemed to be sorting through herbs tirelessly, his tail tip twitching at a rhythmic pace.

Spottedpath looked down and noticed that there was some kind of woven next beneath her. While she was inspecting it, she came to three realizations.

Firstly, she was absolutely parched. Her mouth felt like how the BlazeClan territory looked.

Secondly, she felt more famished than she had ever been. The pit in her stomach felt like she hadn't eaten her days, which was crazy to her, considering how quickly she had left her dream from StarClan.

And lastly, she ached. *Everywhere*. Her body felt like it had been pummeled into the ground relentlessly.

The pain and discomfort wasn't about to stop her, though. Spottedpath moved to rise to her feet, the nest beneath her creaking quietly as she did so. Her legs started shaking before she was even halfway up, and with a grunt she collapsed painfully back into the nest. Muddapple raised his head at the noise and spun around, his golden eyes lighting up when he saw Spottedpath.

"Rest," he ordered gently while stepping away from his task. "There's a damp moss ball next to you for water, I'll fetch you some food."

Spottedpath flicked her ears as she watched Muddapple rush out of the den, leaving her to sit in confusion. There was an uncharacteristic amount of concern in his words, rather than the

curt or chiding tones he liked to take. *What's he so worried about, anyways?* Spottedpath thought. *I'm only sore—I'm fine!* Before she knew it, Muddapple had returned with a plump vole and placed it at her paws.

"Eat it slowly, or else you'll upset your stomach," he instructed more plainly this time. Spottedpath let out a soft sigh; even though he'd adopted his usual tone again, his instructions seemed unusual.

"Why are you talking like I've been starved for a moon?" she queried, meaning it as a joke. When Muddapple only shifted uneasily on his paws, Spottedpath narrowed her eyes.

"It's been a few days since the battle was won," Muddapple explained slowly, his eyes trained worriedly on his patient. "I doubt you've noticed—based off what others reported, you acted like you hadn't noticed your injuries in the first place—but you were *seriously* injured. You lost consciousness almost immediately after you won your fight against Deadeye. Spottedpath, we thought you weren't going to wake up." The last sentence was hardly more than a whisper, and with each cautious word Spottedpath's heart dropped further.

"O-Oh." She couldn't muster up any other words as she glanced down over her body. Cobwebs covered patches of poultices, and for the first time she noticed the sting of each individual wound on her body. *I could have actually died?* she thought in astonishment. *No—I* was *nearly dead.*

"A-Anyways." Muddapple cleared his throat awkwardly and looked away from the warrior he'd grown close to. "The cats of BlazeClan and NightClan came together to weave that nest you're on—that way, four cats could pick it up to carry you to the NightClan camp without worsening your wounds. Once we patched you up there, we moved you here with the rest of SwiftClan. You're going to need to take it easy for at least a few more sunrises—probably more, depending on how quickly those wounds heal."

Spottedpath could only manage a slow nod as she processed his words. The brown tabby returned to his duties after a moment, but he kept an eye on Spottedpath as he did so. For once, she didn't

mind the attention he paid her; even if she did, she knew how worried he must have been. She looked back down at the vole in front of her and tried to focus on eating it slowly. The more Spottedpath thought about what had happened, the more uneasy she felt.

Suddenly, the entrance to the den rustled noisily and Spottedpath looked up to meet the familiar gaze of Brightpelt. The molly's turquoise eyes widened as she met Spottedpath's own blue eyes, her mouth opening wide in exclamation.

"Brightpelt, don't—!" Muddapple whipped around and tried to catch her attention before she made a ruckus, but he wasn't nearly fast enough.

"Oh, you're finally awake!" Her voice might as well have been a shout with how loud it was. Muddapple gave a hiss of exasperation, while Spottedpath struggled to suppress her amusement at the medicine cats.

No sooner than she had spoken, Spottedpath heard a loud scuffling noise from outside of the den. She craned her head forward curiously only to flinch back in surprise as several cats forced their way into the den, pushing Brightpelt out of the way as they did so. Spottedpath blinked in surprise as she met the worried gazes of Nightstream, Mouseberry, and Jayleaf—the presence of the first two made sense, but she hadn't anticipated Jayleaf's appearance.

Muddapple let out a frustrated sigh and waved his tail frantically at the three newcomers. "My *den!"* he cried out, pointing to how they'd scattered leaves and bits of the gorse walls onto the floor. "Come on, you three! There's only so much room in here, and I *just* cleaned."

While he rushed forward to clean up the mess they'd made, Spottedpath's friends glanced at each other sheepishly. Spottedpath watched him, feeling apologetic even though she hadn't caused it.

"We could go sit outside the den, if that's okay," she spoke up softly. "We'll be right outside, and it would be more convenient.

Plus, we wouldn't be interrupting your work with our conversations."

"Absolutely not!" Muddapple retorted as he rounded on Spottedpath, though his expression was nothing but concerned. "You *just* woke up, you should be resting."

Brightpelt cleared her throat, looking amused with the medicine cat she had trained. "It'll be fine, Muddapple. She has a portable nest for a reason, if you really don't want her moving so much. I, for one, am confident she can make it just outside the medicine den and back. If she starts bleeding from her wounds—which I'm certain she won't—we'll both be a fox-length away."

Muddapple narrowed his eyes and gave Spottedpath a serious glance, then scowled at the three warriors who had come to see her. "Fine, just be careful. I'm holding you three accountable if anything happens to her."

Stifling a triumphant snort, Spottedpath struggled to her paws slowly. Taking small steps, she made her way toward the entrance of the den. Mouseberry and Jayleaf rushed to either side of her for support, while Nightstream hovered nervously, as if looking for a way to help. Soon enough Spottedpath was settling against the reinforced gorse wall outside of the medicine den, her gaze traveling over the clearing slowly.

There was a thin layer of snow coating the ground—they'd brushed it away from the spot where they gathered—and cats were bustling about the camp. The longer she looked, the more cats Spottedpath recognized. Almost every cat from the Gorge that had helped during the war was present in the clearing, helping the cats of SwiftClan rebuild walls and reinforce dens. She also noticed a few warriors from BlazeClan—Firthistle, Swallowclaw, and Rockstorm to name some—were helping out.

"You fought like all of LionClan possessed you," Mouseberry mewed, the admiration in his tone drawing Spottedpath's attention in.

"I've heard of that a few times—LionClan. What is it?"

Spottedpath only grew more confused at the surprised look on her friend's face.

"LionClan is one of the Great Clans," Jayleaf explained for him. "We can tell you the stories of them later—a lot has happened since the battle, so you probably want to get caught up."

"He's right!" Mouseberry agreed. Then, the odd-eyed warrior shifted in his spot, as if he was preparing to tell a long story. "I don't know if you saw it, but it turns out that Brackenstar was a traitor to us the whole time. I wasn't part of the fight with him, but Heatherstar told us that once he lost his first life, something seemed off. He took a life from Heatherstar, but when she defended herself she took a second life from him. He didn't get up after that, though."

Spottedpath winced when she heard that, though the feeling didn't last long. She remembered what Heatherstar had said after saving her—she knew well enough that she could have lost lives to Brackenstar.

"Also, Birchtail stepped down from her position as deputy. She said that it was too stressful for her, and then said we all knew who should be the new leader." After he finished speaking, Mouseberry waved his tail to where Hollyheart stood atop the broken tree stump, with Hazelberry by her side.

"Hollyheart." Spottedpath murmured softly before giving a nod of approval. "Your mother was a good choice."

Mouseberry puffed his chest out proudly at that, his eyes glittering. "Remember, she's Holly*star* now. Hazelberry was chosen to be the deputy, too."

Spottedpath kept her eyes trained on Hollystar and Hazelberry, noticing how they watched the busyness of the warriors around them with proud gazes. She followed their gazes, once more noticing just how many cats were present.

"Why are there so many warriors here?" Spottedpath flicked her tail to where Foxleap and Coldstep helped Rockstorm and

Mosspuddle reinforce the new walls of the camp. Mouseberry looked to where she pointed and flicked his ears.

"Heatherstar wanted to do something to make up for the losses SwiftClan has suffered through all of it. She sent a bunch of warriors to help us rebuild our camp, and as you can see it's kind of an ongoing progress. Deadeye and his gang kind of . . . destroyed everything."

"And the Gorge survivors are helping, too?" Spottedpath twitched her whiskers curiously and tried to pick out everybody she knew.

"Well, most of them actually turned on Deadeye during the battle. Pearlstep, Rocksplash, and Snowface ran off with some of the rogues, though," Nightstream spoke up this time, letting out a soft sigh afterwards. Spottedpath only nodded slowly in response as she let her gaze travel further around the camp. Juniperstorm's kits—Palekit, Aspenkit, and Bristlekit—were following some cat out of the camp, their tails raised dutifully.

"Hollystar apprenticed them early because they would *not* stop pestering her about it," Mouseberry explained when he saw where his friend's gaze rested. "Plus, the extra paws have been nice."

"They all wanted to be mentored by you," Nightstream added affectionately, gazing down at Spottedpath. "You're a hero, you know."

"That's nonsense," Spottedpath mumbled sheepishly. "Who are their mentors?"

"Dapplecloud is mentoring Palepaw, my dad is mentoring Bristlepaw, and Haildapple is mentoring Aspenpaw," Mouseberry listed each of them with a flick of his tail.

Spottedpath watched the three young cats for a few moments more before turning to Jayleaf. "What about you, Mr. Strong and Silent?" she teased, reaching out with a paw to nudge him. "Catch me up with what's happening in your life, it's been too long."

Jayleaf let out a laugh and shook his head. "Not much is happening for *me,* but Spiderclaw's kits were apprenticed. Their sixth moon came and went while everything was happening, so it was a few sunrises late, but they were happy to be assigned to Talonstrike and Smallmoon. Oh, and Whitenose and Tinyflight moved to the elders' den—they're the first who've been old enough to retire from warrior duties in a few seasons. Ah, but you're probably not interested in all of that, are you?"

"At this point, I consider the cats of all the Clans to be my friends," Spottedpath responded with a chuckle and a slight shrug. "I care about you all so much, and I'm honestly so relieved that we won against Deadeye."

"We only won because of you, bee-brain," Nightstream muttered with a bit of exasperation in her tone. "I swear, you were half-dead when you killed Deadeye. What were you thinking?"

Spottedpath looked sheepishly at her paws as she shuffled them. "Well, to be honest, I was thinking that if I couldn't survive the fight I'd at least take Deadeye down with me. But hey, I survived!"

Her three closest friends only met her with scowls when she said that. "Well, don't do it again," Nightstream grumbled with a playful cuff over Spottedpath's ear.

They all let out a bout of soft laughter as Spottedpath raised her gaze again. Along with Foxleap, Fernspring, and even Clawtail, she noticed that Frogtooth had joined them and was walking around without any issues, helping the cats of BlazeClan and SwiftClan rebuild the camp. Even Frozenleaf and Shortstep were there, inspecting cats who seemed to be suffering from injuries.

Spottedpath started as she caught Frozenleaf's icy gaze, and only watched in surprise when the healer blinked meaningfully at her. *I'll have to have a word with her at some point,* Spottedpath thought, though she was happy that the healer had decided to help. Then, she remembered Sunpaw, and realized she hadn't seen the sick apprentice since before the battle.

"Hey, where's Sunpaw at?" she asked after a moment of

searching. "I didn't see her in the medicine den when I woke up—"

"Oh, she recovered enough to start helping around the camp!" Mouseberry responded excitedly. "She and the other apprentices were sent out to fetch materials for the camp walls, and for nests."

"That's fantastic!" Spottedpath felt herself perk up at that. She'd started fearing the worst—if Sunpaw had passed when Spottedpath had just named her late siblings in StarClan, she wasn't sure what she would have done.

Beside her, Mouseberry let out a small chuckle, demanding attention from the other three. Spottedpath shifted her gaze to him curiously.

"What's so funny?" she queried, narrowing her eyes when she noticed the odd-eyed tom's attention was on her.

"Nothing," Mouseberry assured her. "It's just . . . Spottedpath, you nearly died, and you're only worried about how everyone else is doing. Yet you try to act like you're not a hero and a natural leader. C'mon!"

"He has a point," Nightstream murmured with a chuckle. "You should be concerned about your own well-being, but here you are . . . ."

"I can't help it!" Spottedpath burst out, feeling her ears heat up with embarrassment. "Come on, you guys. I haven't even been awake for a sunset yet and you're all teasing me!"

Her three friends burst out into warm laughter again, and Spottedpath joined them for a few moments. For once, it felt like the weight that had taken residence on her shoulders—the pressure Shadestar had put on her, and the worries she felt regarding Deadeye and his closest followers—had lifted. Her lungs were free to take full breaths of air for the first time in moons.

Movement by the new entrance to the camp caught her attention. Spottedpath sat up a bit when she saw Palepaw, Aspenpaw, and Bristlepaw come tumbling into the camp, closely

followed by Sunpaw. The four apprentices were laughing together, carrying bundles of brambles and gorse in their mouths and throwing snow into each other's faces. Sunpaw's eyes lit up when she saw Spottedpath, and the apprentice rushed to deposit her bundle before rushing to the recovering warrior.

"Hi Spottedpath!" she chirped happily, nearly all signs of her illness gone. Her eyes still looked glossy from the sickness, and her bones still showed faintly through her skin. "It's good to see you awake again!"

"Oh, thanks, Sunpaw!" Spottedpath mewed back, a bit surprised at her approach. "I'm glad to see you're feeling well, too."

The apprentice sat and spoke a few words to Nightstream, Mouseberry, and Jayleaf, but the entire time it looked like she was holding back. Spottedpath kept an eye on her, curious to know what was troubling her.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and the three warriors by Spottedpath's side returned to their duties. Sunpaw stayed next to her, though, her green eyes fixated on the rays the setting sun cast across the sky and over the camp.

"Have you ever been able to just sit and enjoy a sunset?" Spottedpath murmured quietly, still not sure what the apprentice was holding back.

"Not like this," Sunpaw responded. "Hey, Spottedpath, could I ask you something?"

"Sure, Sunpaw, what is it?" Spottedpath heard rustling from the entrance to the den she sat by, and turned to see Muddapple peeking out at her and jerking his head silently, as if to call her back to her nest. She raised her tail, silently telling him to give her a few moments, at which he rolled his eyes lightheartedly and vanished back into the den.

"Well, I was wondering if maybe you'd accept me as your apprentice? I– I mean, I haven't gotten any training because of the greencough, and what everyone said about you in the battle was—

well, kinda cool." Sunpaw shuffled her paws hesitantly and tried to look around nonchalantly, but to Spottedpath it looked like a poor attempt to cover up her embarrassment.

"You want to be *my* apprentice?" Spottedpath echoed, feeling shocked and amused at the same time. "Isn't Clawtail your mentor, Sunpaw? I'm not really sure that's how it works."

"Well, it can be! I just wanna be like you, I wanna be taught by you!" Sunpaw burst out, stomping her paw into the snow excitedly.

Spottedpath held in a chuckle as she watched the tortoiseshell molly dance on her paws for a few moments. "Okay, okay, fine. After this is all over, we'll see what Hollystar and Clawtail have to say about it, okay?" *Or whoever ends up leading MistClan, if anyone even joins,* Spottedpath added silently, holding back a cringe at her thoughts.

"Awesome!" Sunpaw bounced away quickly, meeting up with the other apprentices of SwiftClan as they settled for the evening. Spottedpath watched her go, wondering what the future would bring for not only herself, but for everyone around her.

Chapter 35

A/N: bippity boppity i almost missed my upload schedule haha whoops :,) next week is the epilogue!
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Many sunrises had passed since Spottedpath had first regained consciousness. Atop the fallen tree stump, Hollystar sat with her head inclined toward a whispering Heatherstar. The BlazeClan leader had arrived shortly after Spottedpath's awakening, but oddly enough, she hadn't spoken a word to the warrior yet.

Spottedpath held back a puff of air as she helped Juniperstorm and Mosspuddle with some easier tasks—things like collecting and organizing the gathered building materials, or sorting the moss piles and herbs just outside the medicine den. Now, the three mollies were brushing snow from the center of the clearing with their tails and pushing it into small piles.

"It's so weird to be back to my warrior duties, now that my kits are apprentices," Juniperstorm mewed quietly with a few flicks of her tail.

"Well, I bet it was nice," Mosspuddle retorted with a light, dreamy tone, "bein' in the nursery all the time."

"Oh, StarClan, no!" Juniperstorm responded with a chuckle. "Those three were so restless, I rarely got any sleep myself!"

Spottedpath let out a soft laugh and nudged Mosspuddle. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're daydreaming about having to move into the nursery yourself!"

Mosspuddle shuffled her paws and flicked her ears in embarrassment. "M-Maybe once I find the right cat! I wouldn't mind havin' a family."

Both Juniperstorm and Spottedpath burst into laughter at the

light grey warrior's verbal fumble. They started sweeping snow away again, but were quickly interrupted by Heatherstar. The BlazeClan leader cleared her throat deliberately, catching their attention.

"Spottedpath, may I have a word?" Heatherstar nodded in the direction of Hollystar as she spoke. Spottedpath gave her SwiftClan companions a nod before following Heatherstar to the fallen tree stump. Once she stood before it, Heatherstar climbed onto it and stood next to Hollystar.

"I'd like to offer a permanent residency to all of the survivors from the Gorge," Hollystar spoke, her blue eyes kind. Meanwhile, Spottedpath was painfully aware of the searching gaze that Heatherstar had fixed on her.

"Actually, there's something I have to do—with them, preferably."

"What is it?" Hollystar leaned forward curiously.

"I need to rebuild MistClan—properly. What happened during the Great Rift will never happen again." Spottedpath resisted the urge to shuffled her paws anxiously and tried to hold her head up confidently.

"Oh?" Heatherstar leaned back, her whiskers twitching. "Will you be its leader, then?"

"What do I know about being a leader?" Spottedpath muttered with a dry laugh. *Why do they all expect me to be the leader of MistClan?*

"It would suit you," Hollystar urged gently. "The cats of the Clans may have followed their leaders into battle, but it was you who made it possible in the first place."

With a sigh, Spottedpath thought back to her conversation with the late leaders of SwiftClan and MistClan. "Well, I was thinking we could add a new role, actually. I'd help the leader with important decisions to make sure they stay within the boundaries of the

warrior code, and if there are any issues with it I could come to the leaders with possible changes to the existing code. This way, there's a better chance at peace, *and* I could continue to carry out the daily warrior tasks with my Clanmates."

Hollystar and Heatherstar looked at each other thoughtfully. After a few moments, Hollystar mewed, "I certainly don't see an issue with that."

Heatherstar flicked her tail matter-of-factly. "But wouldn't we need approval from—"

"I actually . . . kind of already got approval," Spottedpath interrupted cautiously. "From Shadestar and Ivorystar, no less."

"You spoke to Ivorystar?" Hollystar mewed, her eyes wide with surprise. Heatherstar, on the other hand, looked amused at her shock.

"You'll find that there are a lot of surprises with this one, Hollystar," she chided fondly. "There was a reason Fishstar was so adamant about sheltering her."

"However," Spottedpath added awkwardly, "I'll have to talk to the survivors from the Gorge to find out who will be willing to join me in MistClan. I'm not entirely sure if we'll move camps or anything, but we'll cross that mountain when we get to it."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Hollystar queried with an affectionate laugh. "Go round up your warriors, Spottedpath."

Spottedpath managed a hurried nod and spun on her paws, looking for the first cats she would approach. At the edge of the clearing, she spotted Frozenleaf and Shortstep huddled together. She padded up to them quietly and cleared her throat awkwardly, hoping to catch their attention.

"It's good to see both of you," Spottedpath murmured quietly when she saw she had their attention. Shortstep quickly turned to Frozenleaf and gave her a wordless, yet meaningful look.

With a troubled sigh, Frozenleaf met Spottedpath's gaze. "I'm

sorry about the things I've said, and for what I've done. You were right—I shouldn't have allowed things to deteriorate so much."

"I'm sorry as well, Frozenleaf," Spottedpath shot back quickly, dipping her head to the white-furred molly. "I know the position you were in was agonizing for you. I can't even begin to imagine how it must have felt, but I'm glad it's over now. If you're willing to put all of that behind us, I've got a proposition for you."

"Oh?" Frozenleaf blinked in surprise as Shortstep leaned forward, his whiskers twitching curiously. Spottedpath held back a chuckle as she unveiled her request.

"I'm going to be rebuilding MistClan. I mean, it's something I'd like to do, but it turns out I'm missing a couple medicine cats. Luckily, I know two *healers* who are about as skilled as they come and, well . . . ." Spottedpath trailed off meaningfully, her eyes locked to the two cats in front of her.

"Oh, you flatter me." Frozenleaf held Spottedpath's gaze, showing no intention of responding further than that.

"Seriously," Spottedpath pressed gently, watching them both closely. "Against all odds, you managed to keep Sunpaw alive. Besides, I heard from a certain someone that the other medicine cats are missing their MistClan friends." She reached out with a paw and nudged Frozenleaf gently.

"Oh, alright," Frozenleaf caved with an exasperated sigh. "Shortstep, what do you say?"

Shortstep looked a bit conflicted at first. His amber eyes flickered longingly to something beyond Spottedpath. Before she could turn to see what it was, he pulled his gaze back.

"Yeah, I'd really like that," he murmured. "It'd be nice to finally visit Starfalls!"

"You can count me in, too!" Spottedpath started at Frogtooth's approach. The blind molly walked as though her sight wasn't impaired at all. "I'll be honest, I used my blindness as a way out of

the constant fights Deadeye pushed us into. I'd like to be a warrior again, Spottedpath—a warrior of MistClan."

Spottedpath looked at Frogtooth for a few moments. "Well, I don't plan on being the leader, but I don't see anything wrong with you becoming a warrior once again as long as you promise you'll be careful. And . . . thank you. For what you did for us at the Gorge."

"Oh, that?" Frogtooth let out a belt of laughter and clumsily nudged Frozenleaf. "That was nothing. Those rogues will believe anything."

Frozenleaf's expression softened for just a moment, but when she spoke again it was serious. "Speaking of rogues, some of them remained at the camp when we left. With Deadeye gone, they didn't seem to have any ill intent, but I doubt they'll willingly leave the camp."

"Maybe we could talk to them." Spottedpath felt her heart lift as the idea immediately dawned on her. "They want territory and a safe camp, we need enough warriors to be a functioning Clan. We can recruit them!"

"I suppose we could give it a shot," Frozenleaf murmured hesitantly. "I have to ask, though, if you won't be the leader, who will?"

Spottedpath found herself hesitating at the question. She glanced around the camp slowly when she thought of an answer. "Well, there's one cat that the Clans might be willing to trust. Mudwing was trusted by the cats in the Gorge, but he was also one of the first to help the Clans, *and* he's had an apprentice too. I just hope Clawtail is okay with it—I know regents don't become leader, but still—"

"Go ahead and ask him, Spottedpath," Clawtail spoke up from behind Spottedpath, startling the young warrior. The stocky molly shuffled to stand next to Frogtooth. "My mother, Molestrike, died because of my own inaction to stop what was happening. I'd like to rebuild the trust of the cats I know before I get into a position of power."

"T-Thanks, Clawtail," Spottedpath murmured after tidying her ruffled fur.

Without another word, she rushed off to find Mudwing. She spotted his familiar black-and-white pelt next to Coldstep; the two seemed to be deeply engrossed in a conversation. Spottedpath padded up to the two warriors slowly and decided to wait for their conversation to end.

"Hey, Spottedpath!" Mudwing greeted her when she approached. "It's good to see you out and about again."

"Thank you, Mudwing," Spottedpath dipped her head to the elder warrior briefly. "I actually wanted to ask you something, if you don't mind?"

"Oh, sure, go ahead." Mudwing twitched his whiskers in surprise, and Spottedpath thought she saw a hint of uncertainty in his green eyes.

"Well, I'd like to rebuild our camp—as one of the Clans, like it was many seasons ago. The thing is, we'd need a leader for that, and you seem like a reasonable choice to me." Despite her attempt to keep her words concise, Spottedpath felt like she was fumbling over them, and her ears grew hot with shame.

"What about Clawtail?" Mudwing sat straight up, visibly shocked by the question.

"She decided to rebuild the trust of everyone before she assumes a position of power," Spottedpath explained quickly. "You're trusted by the cats of the Clans as well as our own campmates, and you meet all the criteria to become a Clan leader—you just weren't a deputy, but this is a special case."

"I think you'd do good," Coldstep nudged him with a playful twinkle in her eyes. Spottedpath suppressed her surprise at the action—perhaps the war did more than change a few minds.

"You don't want to become the leader?" Mudwing questioned Spottedpath, his ears perked curiously.

"I don't have the experience for it," Spottedpath responded with a thoughtful hum. "Besides, there's a new role we're implementing—an overseer, to ensure history doesn't repeat itself."

Mudwing held his gaze on her for a few moments. "Okay, I'll do it. Are we returning to the caves?"

"Unless you know of a better camp." Spottedpath shrugged and looked away. "I'm going to gather the cats who want to join us, and if you want, we can set out immediately."

"Count me in." Coldstep rose to her paws and dipped her head to Spottedpath and Mudwing.

Spottedpath nodded thankfully and bounded off to find the next Gorge cat. She glanced around the clearing and paused as she tried to pick out the cats she knew—they mingled with the BlazeClan cats and SwiftClan cats as they worked, and made it hard for her to single anyone out. She did notice Mouseberry, however, as he padded up to her cheerily.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he murmured casually as he approached. "I'd like to join you all in MistClan."

Spottedpath stared at him for a few moments in shock. "Mouseberry, you have a life here—this is your home!"

"It wouldn't be my home without my best friend," he retorted smoothly, his odd-colored eyes twinkling with mirth. Spottedpath gave him a serious look but found herself quickly caving.

"Okay, fine," she groaned as she shouldered him affectionately. "Check with Hollystar, first, though—I don't want her to think I'm just stealing her son away. I need to keep rounding up my old campmates."

As Mouseberry trotted off to speak to Hollystar, Spottedpath let out a sigh and started circling the camp in search of the Gorge survivors. She found Foxleap and Fernspring first, and her mother and sister immediately agreed to join her in MistClan. Then, she ran into Redflight and Finclaw. The two toms both agreed to join as

long as Thornheart came, as well.

Spottedpath took them to see Thornheart in the nursery, and after a moment of deep consideration, the queen decided to come along. Afterwards, Spottedpath visited Sunpaw, who leaped at the chance to join the rest of their campmates. Once she left the apprentice, she spotted Ironheart and Rabbitflight sitting with Longstep and, after a moment of hesitation, approached them.

"Hey, Ironheart, Rabbitflight," Spottedpath mewed awkwardly. "I'm going to be rebuilding MistClan—in our old camp above the Gorge. Would you like to join us?"

"Sure," Rabbitflight murmured after a moment, his amber eyes twinkling thoughtfully.

"I think I'd like to stay in SwiftClan, with Longstep," Ironheart spoke up, looking uneasy at the idea of returning to the caves. "Being in those caves reminded me of Brownpaw's death every day, and I don't think I can continue to relive it."

"I understand," Spottedpath responded sympathetically. She reached out and touched her nose to the ginger molly's, then remembered the ceremony she'd given the fallen apprentice. "I actually spoke to him, in StarClan. They allowed him to receive his full warrior name upon entering their ranks."

Both Ironheart and Rabbitflight let out small gasps at her words, and Spottedpath noticed Longstep tense slightly. "What's his name, then?" Ironheart whispered with round eyes.

"He rests in the ranks of our ancestors as Fallensky—he requested something that ties him to his death, and he loves it." Spottedpath gazed at the warriors in front of her warily, waiting for their reaction to the name she gave him.

"Thank you for telling us, Spottedpath," Ironheart finally murmured after a few heartbeats. Her voice was full of happiness for her son, and Spottedpath breathed a sigh of relief.

Spottedpath turned away from the Ironheart and Longstep to

find their other child, and her own closest friend. She quickly singled Nightstream out at the edges of the clearing. Upon her approach, Nightstream fixed Spottedpath with a knowing gaze.

"Word spreads fast here," Nightstream purred as she leaned forward to lick Spottedpath's ear.

"S-So you'll join us, in MistClan?" Spottedpath stuttered, the affectionate action taking her by surprise. She immediately felt her ears heat up and her heart start pounding painfully against her ribcage.

"Of course I'll join," Nightstream responded. Amusement and admiration glittered in her amber eyes. "I'd follow you to the ends of the world, if you asked me to."

Spottedpath swallowed down her embarrassment as she erupted into a loud purr. She stepped forward and brushed against Nightstream happily for a moment. As she did, she realized she'd spoken to all of the Gorge survivors, and moved to let Mudwing know. When she started walking away from Nightstream, Jayleaf and Swallowclaw approached her.

"I heard what you're doing," Jayleaf murmured. "I'm really proud of you—you're not the scared apprentice that we knew anymore."

As Spottedpath let out an amused purr, Swallowclaw started speaking. "You know we can't join you, but we wanted to tell you that you'll always have support from BlazeClan, no matter what."

"Thanks, both of you," Spottedpath mewed happily. "I'll make sure to stop by during the next Gathering."

She touched her nose to both of the BlazeClan warriors affectionately before turning away. On her path to Mudwing, Spottedpath noticed that both Hollystar and Heatherstar watched her curiously, and she stopped to thank them both a final time.

"I'll make sure to talk with Mudwing and make sure that we return the territory you've lost," she promised them, bowing her head respectfully. "The territories can be divided evenly once again.

Thank you both—for everything."

Hollystar exchanged a sly glance with Heatherstar before rearing up and pulling both of them into an embrace. Spottedpath stiffened at first, but then relaxed. When they pulled away, she saw that even Heatherstar looked amused.

"Make sure you tell us if you start receiving any more prophetic dreams, Spottedpath," the BlazeClan leader ordered playfully before nodding at the sinking sun. "You better fetch Mudwing and be on your way if you want to return before nightfall. It'll only get colder from now on, and I'm sure you'll all be happy to be in that cave of yours."

Spottedpath bowed her head to the leaders again and left to fetch Mudwing. Before she knew it, they were all trekking across the SwiftClan territory. Mudwing led them with Coldstep and Foxleap at either side. Frozenleaf and Shortstep weren't far behind them, followed by the rest of the cats who chose to come. Spottedpath took up a space near the front of the group, with Nightstream by her side and Mouseberry close behind her.

Snow flew behind them as they collectively took up a racing pace. Spottedpath couldn't help gazing at the cats who had put their trust in her to lead them to a better future, and she felt her heart swell with pride. *They've lost everything they know, and they still want to move forward and do better,* she thought in amazement.

Once they reached the cave they used to call a home, they all paused and glanced at each other uneasily. Even Mudwing had hesitated at the top of the ledge that led down into the cave, his amber eyes glittering with uncertainty. Spottedpath shared a look with Nightstream, feeling slightly exasperated, before she stepped forward to lead them into the caves. Even though the sun hadn't set yet, she could see light peeking out of the cave and knew that the rogues would be inside with a fire burning, just like before.

Inside, Spottedpath saw that the same eight from before were gathered around a small fire, each looking content with themselves. They perked up when Spottedpath entered the cave, followed by the hesitant group of warriors that accompanied her. Ace, the

chocolate-and-white tabby tom, stepped forward wordlessly as though he expected to be addressed. Spottedpath narrowed her eyes and held her tail up when Mudwing opened his mouth to speak. *Don't think I forgot about you, Aldric,* she thought as she located the silver-point tabby. She remembered all too well how Bastien and Hecate had shielded him during the battle, or how Bastien seemed to shadow him wherever he went.

"Aldric, I've come with a proposition for you and your rogues," Spottedpath spoke after a few moments, her eyes trained on the tom.

Each of the rogues and Clan cats seemed to reel back in surprise—all except Aldric, that is. While Tangle, Lucien, Eternity, Ace, and Eclipse all widened their eyes in shock, Bastien and Hecate both rose to their paws defensively. Aldric, however, licked his paw and drew it lazily over his ear.

"What, pray tell," Aldric responded confidently as he rose to his paws and stepped forward, "is this *proposition?"* Despite his confidence and smooth tone, Spottedpath noticed a hint of interest in his deep green eyes.

"We're rebuilding a Clan that Deadeye's predecessor destroyed," Spottedpath explained, trying to keep her tone even as she held the tom's gaze. "A Clan that Deadeye tried to keep snuffed out. We need members to rebuild, while you and your closest want the territory you were promised, along with shelter. If you join us, you'll receive it, no strings attached."

Aldric was silent for a moment, looking thoughtful. When he spoke, there was a twinkle of mockery in his eyes. "And what of this silly StarClan nonsense you forest cats are always going on about?"

"You don't have to believe in it if you don't want to," Spottedpath decided almost instantly. "However, I'd still like for you all to learn the stories of our past—and you can tell us your own tales. It's our history, and it's what we pass down to our children when we move on from the world."

Aldric fell silent again, and Spottedpath found herself holding

her breath. *Come on, just join us. There's been enough bloodshed lately!* she thought desperately. Even the rogues behind him were watching him closely, visibly braced to receive an order to fight.

"We'll join you," Aldric finally decided. "If you want, we can show each of you how to make fire, too, so long as you all vow to never use it for harm."

"Thank you, Aldric." Spottedpath bowed her head to him a little too excitedly, but she didn't care. Then, she turned to address everyone else. "We'll start by cleaning the dens and restocking the herbs and fresh-kill piles immediately—leafbare is here and the last thing we want is to be taken by surprise by a shortage. Mudwing, you should go straight to Starfalls with Frozenleaf and Shortstep once the sun sets. They'll walk you through the ceremony to receive your nine lives."

Just like that, the cave that used to be an epicenter of distress and misery turned lively with the bustling of the cats. Spottedpath drove herself forward as she helped clean out all of the dens; she found herself working with Eclipse and Eternity to throw out all of the old moss, and though their presence was unsettling at first, they made for good company.

"That grey molly keeps sneaking glances at you," they spoke, their voices mixing together as they entered Deadeye's old den inside of the Smoothstone.

"Who, Nightstream?" Spottedpath murmured, growing a bit embarrassed and amused. The two sisters nodded as they used their tails to sweep out the dried up bits of moss and old bones that littered the ground.

Spottedpath joined in quickly, and as she was brushing the debris out into the main cave, she paused to look at how everyone worked together so easily. Tangle and Lucienne had started following a flustered Mouseberry around, the former speaking excitedly as his curly fawn-colored fur bounced with his movements. Hecate seemed to be getting along with Clawtail as the two mollies tipped over an oddly-shaped stone to store the new fresh-kill pile. Even more shocking was the sight of Bastien by a lively Frogtooth. The

two of them let out boisterous laughter as they tossed collections of old moss into a giant pile, and a few times the giant tom stopped to guide the blind molly back onto the correct path.

Suddenly, she remembered all the cats they had lost as a result of Deadeye's cruelty. Instead of letting herself wallow in misery at the losses, Spottedpath took one look at the fire and padded up to it. She let out a yowl to call the attention of all the cats in the clearing, and once they gathered around her, she spoke.

"Now that we reclaimed our camp and ended the evil reign of Deadeye, there's one more thing I'd like to do." The cats watched Spottedpath with round eyes as she slowly approached the flaming pile of sticks. "We're going to properly mourn the deaths that we never got the chance to remember—starting with the youngest of them all."

Spottedpath reached a paw out and pressed it firmly into the ashes that lined the fire. Then, she raised it and pressed it against the Smoothstone, creating a mark with the soot. "For Blackpaw, who was renamed Blackflame upon entering StarClan. He suffered through his illness bravely, and we will never forget him."

When Spottedpath hesitated after the first mark, the cats surrounding her erupted into cheers of the fallen cat's name. Spottedpath felt a mixture of pride and sorrow overcome her, and she quickly carried on. For each name she announced, she made a new mark on the Smoothstone.

"For Dapplepaw, who was granted the name Dapplesplash when she left this world and entered the region of our ancestors. For Brownpaw, who earned the name of Fallensky upon joining those same starry ranks." With each name she spoke, the cats who gathered around her repeated their names—even their newest members joined in the heartfelt ceremony, even though they held no emotional ties to the deceased.

Spottedpath continued naming all of their fallen warriors, even the ones who died fighting by Deadeye's side. *For Fireclaw. For Riverdash. For Morningflower. For Greyheart. For Dustleap.* With each name and each marking, Spottedpath's voice grew more taut with

emotion, as did the voices that chimed with her.

"For Hawkscar, the best mentor a cat could have had." Spottedpath's voice dropped to a trembling whisper as she smeared soot onto the Smoothstone. She paused, suddenly too scared to tear her gaze from the marking on the large stone—she was close to breaking down at this point.

Spottedpath started as she felt a tail rest comfortingly over hers, and she glanced to the right to meet Nightstream's sympathetic gaze. "For Hawkscar," the grey molly echoed softly.

With a deep breath, Spottedpath moved to put three final markings onto the stone for the cats who had gone missing at the end of the war. "For Snowface, Rocksplash, and Pearlstep." She steadied her voice once more as she spoke their names, and as she finished, every cat in the clearing rose their voices into a mournful cry for the cats that they'd lost over the moons.

Afterwards, Mudwing approached her, his eyes round with admiration. "You'll be a fine overseer for us, Spottedpath," he mewed quietly. "You've already brought everyone together, and I can tell they've put their trust in you—even the rogues have dedicated their lives to us, and our future."

"You'll be an even finer leader, Mudwing," Spottedpath murmured, dipping her head. "Thank you for joining me. Our future can only get brighter from here on, and I'll do everything to make sure we achieve the life our ancestors wanted for us."

Epilogue

Spottedpath hummed happily as the warm newleaf breeze flowed through her fur. She and Nightstream had found a small clearing that overlooked the river inside the Gorge. When they realized that the daily patrols rarely strayed close to the patch of land, they quickly claimed it as their own hideout when they wanted some peace and quiet from their Clanmates.

"More flowers, your highness?" Nightstream's teasing mew called Spottedpath from her blissful daze. The grey-speckled molly leaned over Spottedpath with a few stems from a nearby orchid plant clamped in her jaws. Before Spottedpath could protest, Nightstream was shaking the branches, sending a cascade of petals down onto her golden-spotted fur.

Almost immediately, Nightstream burst into a fit of affectionate laughter. The sound of her laugh was too contagious, and Spottedpath found herself joining in quickly. Just as soon as it had started, their laughter ceased, and the two mollies found themselves happily lost in each other's gazes.

"That look suits you," Nightstream mewed suddenly, her amber eyes holding a mischievous glint.

"What, being covered in shredded flowers?" Spottedpath retorted playfully. She nudged Nightstream in an attempt to hide how nervous she managed to make her every time.

"No, not that." Nightstream paused and pretended to look thoughtful for a heartbeat. "It's that mock-grumpy, disheveled look you get when you're flustered."

Spottedpath immediately became flushed, her ears growing hot and her fur ruffling defensively. Nightstream collapsed in another fit of laughter as Spottedpath searched miserably for the words to defend herself. The sight of the molly's giggles — her sides heaving from the effort of keeping her laughter down — only embarrassed

her more.

"That's it! That's the look!" Nightstream exclaimed between bursts of breathless laughter. She managed to nudge Spottedpath affectionately between fits, finally dragging the golden tabby into her bouts of laughter.

Eventually their laughing died down, and the two mollies dedicated their attention to the sun as it began to set. Spottedpath closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth that the sun cast onto them. Beside her, Nightstream shifted a bit and prodded her side gently.

"Thornheart's kits are about ready to be apprentices, you know," she murmured lazily. "Fernspring's kits can't be that far behind them. Who do you think they'll be assigned to?"

Spottedpath peeked an eye open and saw that Nightstream was waiting impatiently for her response. "Are you excited to finally have your first apprentice, Night?" she purred teasingly.

"You know I am!" Nightstream sat up a bit, as if she were trying to make herself look more responsible. "You already got Sunheart, it's my turn to train some diligent warriors! Maybe I'll get one of Fernspring's kits — Asterkit, Poppykit, and Crowkit are so well-behaved."

"They really are. Jaggedkit and Cliffkit share Thornheart's serious attitude *and* her poor temper." Spottedpath gave a soft chuckle as she agreed before she remembered something concerning. "I just hope Fernspring's kits don't get the same harsh treatment that Shortstep has gotten from some of the medicine cats." Even though the cats of MistClan didn't care about his relationship with Fernspring, a few of the other medicine cats had made a point out of excluding him from their conversations.

Nightstream made a face when she said that. "You mean the fits they throw over that silly rule about medicine cats having kits? Why don't you suggest that it changes? You *are* overseer, after all."

"It's not that simple," Spottedpath mewed with a sigh. "I make sure our leader follows the warrior code — the medicine cat code is

something totally different, and their business is still their business. I do agree that it's ridiculous, though — the risk of him giving his kits special treatment is the same as him giving his siblings or parents special treatment!"

"Exactly!"

The bushes on the far side of the clearing rustled before Tangle and Lucienne stepped into view. Spottedpath quickly sat upright while Nightstream remained laying by her side.

"Oh, are we interrupting a moment?" Tangle asked innocently, though the glint of amusement in his green eyes betrayed him.

"No," Spottedpath murmured with a glance at Nightstream. "What is it you need?"

"Are you sure? We can always find Foxleap or Mudstar instea — *oof."*

Lucienne rolled her eyes and elbowed Tangle as she stepped forward. "We've been keeping tabs on the rogues in the city — er, the Twolegplace. They've been gathering, and it's clear to us that something is going on."

"Rumor is the warriors who went missing at the end of the Great Battle have joined them," Tangle whispered after dropping his playful tone. "I know a few cats who said they're trying to stage some kind of conflict with the Clans."

Spottedpath eyed them both warily. "They wouldn't be able to organize such a thing — especially not at the start of newleaf, when the Clans are only growing in strength. Keep an eye on it for now, and make sure Mudstar is aware of it."

"Yes, Spottedpath," they chimed before leaving.

As soon as they were gone, Spottedpath laid down next to Nightstream once again. A troubled sigh left her lungs, and soon Nightstream was dangling another orchid branch over her. She shook it violently, the action sending a flurry of petals over Spottedpath, who laughed in response. Spottedpath noticed a pile of

petals and leaves accumulating at her paws and scooped them up to throw them back at Nightstream. They both erupted into fits of giggles and laughter again, and Spottedpath found her worries easing away.

"Hey," Nightstream murmured after a few sublime moments with her partner. "The sun is setting — can you tell me the legend of the Great Clans while the stars come out?"

Spottedpath twitched her whiskers as she recalled the stories she had heard from Mouseberry and Jayleaf over the moons. "A long, long time ago, there were three Clans. Their names were TigerClan, LionClan, and LeopardClan, and in these Clans were the biggest, fiercest cats to have ever roamed the lands." Spottedpath let her body fall fully flat against the grass beneath her as she locked her gaze to the setting sun.

"The cats of LionClan were proud and noble, with manes that flowed with all the warmth of the sun. The cats of LeopardClan were swift runners and agile climbers, with spots dancing on their pelts like embers from a dying flame. The cats of TigerClan were cunning and stealthy; they used the night to trick their foes, and were branded with jet-black stripes on top of their fiery pelts to honor this. Whenever the Great Clans were faced with a new and unusual foe, they put their skills together to solve the problem swiftly — that is, until a mightier enemy than anyone had ever seen came along . . . ."

As Spottedpath recited the tales that had burned themselves into her mind, she felt the sun's rays slowly creep away and over the edge of the world. The absence of their warmth didn't bother her, though, as she was warm enough in the company of Nightstream along with the thoughts of their ancestors watching over them.